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*Cover: A view of the Himalayas
from Nepal*

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उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

ARISE! AWAKE! AND STOP NOT TILL THE GOAL IS REACHED.

Vol. 101

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No. 4

Divine Wisdom

HOLINESS

प्रसङ्गमजरं पाशमात्मनः कवयो विदुः ।
स एव साधुषु कृतो मोक्षद्वारमपावृतम् ॥

The wise say that intense attachment to the objects of the world is the cause of bondage for the soul. The same attachment, if directed towards holy men, opens the gate of liberation.

तितक्षवः कारुणिकाः सुहृदः सर्वदेहिनाम् ।
अजातशत्रवः शान्ताः साधवः साधुभूषणाः ॥

मय्यनन्येन भावेन भक्तिं कुर्वन्ति ये दृढाम् ।
मत्कृते त्यक्तकर्माणिस्त्यक्तस्वजनबान्धवाः ॥

A holy man is one who is patient in all circumstances, who is full of fellow-feeling, who is the friend of all, who looks upon none as enemy, who is overflowing with peace, who has virtue alone as his ornament, and who has a deep-rooted love for Me, characterized by a sense of inseparable intimacy. He works solely for My sake and abandons all dependence on relatives and clansmen (preferring to depend solely on Me).

मदाश्रयाः कथा मृष्टाः शृण्वन्ति कथयन्ति च ।
तपन्ति विविधास्तापा नैतान्मद्गतचेतसः ॥

He always hears and speaks of My sanctifying deeds and excellences. His mind being fully given over to Me, no affliction ever affects or troubles him.

Those Mischievous Gods

Often we find that our *sādhana*, spiritual practices, do not remain orderly for long. Something the other keeps breaking our attempts at regularity. So the thought that we have not made any significant progress over the years begins to eat into our spiritual keenness. Failing to derive any joy from *japa* and meditation, we become dejected.

But this despondency is a great obstacle to our growth. Hence the common advice is to overcome it through perseverance. Whatever the disturbance, whatever the number of times we are thrown off our routine, we are to keep striving tenaciously. In other words, we should consider ourselves always greater than the opposition.

An effective aid to sustain perseverance is holy company, which we discussed last month. Here we shall take a look at another aid, rather a complement to perseverance, viz. compassion. Compassion for the gods visualized as the personifications of the innumerable stumbling blocks on our spiritual path. We are to feel sorry for these obstacle-gods who, jealous of our spiritual aspiration, are out to douse it.

This outlook has an element of humour and joyful self-confidence. Just perseverance, with clenched teeth, makes us tense, unduly serious, exhausted and dry. Humour added to perseverance makes light of our obstacles. For instance, the unforgettable banters Sri Ramakrishna indulged in while leading his disciples through intense *sadhana*. The two together are capable of

filling us with a tireless enthusiasm that says, 'We shall overcome—if not today, then tomorrow; or finally anyway.'

We take the cue from the *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* (1.4.10), which says:

तदिदमप्येतर्हि य एवं वेद, अहं ब्रह्मास्मीति, स इदं सर्वं भवति, तस्य ह न देवाश्चनाभूत्या ईशते, आत्मा ह्येषां स भवति; अथ योऽन्यां देवतामुपास्ते, अन्योऽसावन्योऽहमस्मीति, न स वेद, यथा पशुरेवं स देवानाम् । यथा ह वै बहवः पशवो मनुष्यं भुञ्ज्युः, एवमेकैकः पुरुषो देवान् भुनक्ति; एकास्मिन्नेव पशावादीयमानेऽप्रियं भवति, किमु बहुषु? तस्मादेषां तन्न प्रियं यदेतन्मनुष्या विद्युः ॥

Tadidamapyetarhi ya evam veda, ahaṁ brahmāsmīti, sa idaṁ sarvaṁ bhavati, tasya ha na devāścanābhūtyā īśate, ātmā hyeṣāṁ sa bhavati; atha yo'nyāṁ devatāmupāste, anyo'sāvano'hamasmīti, na sa veda, yathā paśurevaṁ sa devānām. Yathā ha vai bahavaḥ paśavo manuṣyaṁ bhuñjyuh, evamekaikaḥ puruṣo devān bhunakti; ekasminneva paśāvādīyamāne'priyaṁ bhavati, kimu bahuṣu? Tasmādeṣāṁ tanna priyaṁ yadetanmanuṣyā vidyuh.

And to this day whoever in like manner knows It (one's true self) as, 'I am Brahman', becomes all this (universe). Even the gods cannot prevail against him, for he becomes their self. While he who worships another god thinking, 'He is one, and I am another', does not know. He is like an animal to the gods. As many animals serve a man, so does each man serve the gods. Even if one animal is taken away, it causes anguish. What

should one say of many animals? Therefore it is not liked by them (gods) that human beings should know this (truth of the oneness of the self and Brahman).

Why do the gods dislike our seeking God, Atman, *mukti*? Why do they contrive to keep us in their control? How is our striving for enlightenment a potential loss for them?

For an answer, we should understand the relationship between a farmer and his animals. Both stand in need of each other to fulfil their respective wants. The animals need fodder, water, oilcake, protection and propagation, and the farmer milk, meat, labour, etc. The former, however, are devoid of discrimination and are entirely content with having their requirements satisfied in return for whatever they can do to please their master. And he, being more intelligent and therefore more powerful, knows how to work the animals to his advantage. So he protects and nourishes them. In this way, naturally the loss of even one animal causes him great anguish.

Similar is the relationship between gods and ordinary human beings—who like animals have no spiritual aspiration; who believe that they are separate from and weaker than the gods; and who are satisfied merely with health, wealth, beauty, fame, power, and such other worldly pleasures, which are under the control of the gods. These gods for their part have their needs—the sacrificial and ritual offering from the humans; wine and meat, bread and cake, fruit and honey. These they secure by protecting and now and then ‘feeding’ their humans in return for their offerings.

Hence, such people, who are without discrimination, spiritually dull and subservient to the gods out of ignorance and awe, are like animals to the gods. In fact, one

stupid person is to the gods what several animals are to a farmer. Therefore one who is ignorant of his or her spiritual nature, who stands turned away from the spiritual goal, is, in fun, sometimes referred to as *devānām priyaḥ*, dear to the gods. But a steady spiritual aspirant, disinterested in worldly pleasures, feels no more bound to please the gods with offerings. He is convinced it is enough to seek and please only the Master of the gods. Thus one person progressing Godward means, to the gods, a painful decrease in offerings. Now we see why the gods dislike losing even one person, and disrupt the sadhana of anyone trying to break free.

The *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* also (3.13.1–6) speaks of the obstacles as gods. Whereas the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (quoted) mentions them in a general way the *Chāndogya* refers to the inner obstacles we face during meditation, when we try to enter into our spiritual heart:

Of that heart, the City of Brahman, there are five doors protected by the gods ... eye...ear...speech...mind...energy.... They are the five persons of Brahman, the doorkeepers of Brahman within the heart. (*Translation not literal.*)

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya’s commentary on this text says that these guards keep the entrance to the City of the supreme Self blocked.

Let us try to understand the above text: How do these gods prevent our entry into the City? We get the answer on examining the difficulties we face during meditation. No sooner than we close our eyes and begin to lead our mind into the heart where our Chosen Deity resides, the mind, inexplicably and uncontrollably, is thrown into a turmoil by so many distractions. Finally we get repulsed, thrown out. Depressingly, on almost all occasions we are the vanquished, gods the jubilant victors.

Now, what are the forces that engage the mind during our attempts to meditate? They are—various forms, thoughts, sounds, voices, and so on. These very distractors—thirty-three million gods, the Hindus say—are what the *Chāndogya* speaks of, classifying and personifying them as the five gate-keeping gods.

The god of eye is the sum total of the forms that draw our attention away during meditation; the ear-god is the embodiment of all the sounds and others' voices we hear; the speech-god the internal conversations, debates and discourses we get entangled in; the mind-god the myriad thoughts and memories that swarm us; the energy-god the impulses, the promptings, concerning our activities, which remind us, 'This remains to be done...that should have been done in another way...fifteen minutes of meditation is enough today, because there is an urgently pending task...; get up....' And in ten minutes, chased far away from the City-gate, there we are—eyes open, and ready to get to work in the bright, familiar, inviting world. Alas! all these days we never thought that those mischievous gods were diligently at work.

But now there is hope. For, both the Upaniṣads teach that these gods can be overcome: The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* points out how weak the gods are against a person who is awake to his or her divine nature as the Atman which is immortal, without want and therefore independent; the Atman which being one with Brahman is all-pervasive and hence the very basis of all existence, including that of the gods themselves.

Therefore, beginners though we are and the obstacles formidable, we can suggest to ourselves occasionally in a lighter vein: 'Oh, those gods are at work. Poor things. Themselves enslaved by the delights of heaven, they have missed the joy of sense-

control and spiritual illumination. Now jealous of my higher aspiration, they are at their game. O you gods who are trying to delay my progress, your attempts are bound to fail in the long run. For, I who am the Self of your selfhood, will certainly attain my goal.'

When we unmask the un-godly tricks in this way, the gods are beaten back, at least for the time being—more or less like a mischief-monger who flees on being discovered under his guises. This is the daring method of first mocking and then mentally dissolving the obstacle-gods into oneself as Brahman. To say this again in the bhakti-language of Sri Ramakrishna, we are not to get frightened by desires etc. We should, he says, turn them Godward. And that is what Karmayoga too is all about.

The *Chāndogya* has its own way of helping us counter the gods. It begins at our level, in which we feel that the gods and Brahman are distinct from us, and the gods appear stronger than we. To dispel our false notion that the gods are superior to us, first it uses the phrase, 'doorkeepers of Brahman'. Thus, interpreting this in the present context, we may once in a while exclaim, 'I, who am Brahman, I the divine child of God, am of course superior to the guards of my own home. Retainers that you are, you will have to give way. I must enter the City and meet my Father.'

Next, like the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, it teaches a higher attitude in keeping with the ultimate truth of the oneness of self-gods-Brahman. In this method also the gods are to be overcome by absorbing them into oneself. However, the *Chāndogya* puts this idea in a way slightly different from that of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. For example, to win over the god of hearing, one should, it says, meditate on that god as prosperity and fame. As a result the meditator becomes

prosperous and famous. That is to say, that god, losing his earlier nature, becomes an integral part of the meditator's being. So with the other gods. Thus all the problematic gods are overcome one by one by realizing them as one's own manifestations.

These practices of surmounting the hindrances to our sadhana through the technique of absorbing them into oneself or of looking upon them as one's own manifestations are for those inclined to Advaita. Others can look upon the hindrances as placed by God to strengthen their spiritual muscles, or as His various manifestations. In any case we stand to gain by bearing in mind that these obstacles are neither everlasting

nor undefeatable *opponents*. They also after all derive their existence and power from God whose children we are. They will have to acknowledge a spiritual aspirant's right of way.

Thus we can further strengthen our usual sadhana by making use of these suggestions of the Upaniṣads: compassion, humour and self-confidence. Instead of becoming victims of dejection under the strain of sadhana, we can sit back once in a while and chuckle for cheer: 'What! Am I going to give up against the jealous gods? Am I going to remain an animal of the gods? Never! These poor gods, helpless in their golden prison, will be defeated.'



(The following is an extract from The Light of Asia, the life and teachings of Lord Buddha, by Sir Edwin Arnold. In these lines we see Buddha's battle, on his way to Nirvana, against some of the strongest barriers, depicted here not as gods but as the vile followers of Mara, delusion personified:)

...But he who is the Prince
Of Darkness, Mara—knowing this was
Buddh
Who should deliver men, and now
the hour
When he should find the Truth and
save the worlds—
Gave unto all his evil powers
command.
Wherefore there trooped from every
deepest pit...
Seeking to shake his mind;...
...sometimes with wiles and
words
Fair-sounding, 'mid hushed leaves and
softened airs
From shapes of witching beauty;
wanton songs,
Whispers of love; sometimes with
royal allures

Of proffered rule; sometimes with
mocking doubts,
Making truth vain. But whether these
befell
Without and visible, or whether Buddh
Strove with fell spirits in his inmost
heart,
Judge ye:—I write what ancient books
have writ.
The ten chief Sins came—Mara's
mighty ones,
Angels of evil—Attavāda first,
The Sin of Self, who in the Universe
As in a mirror sees her fond face
shown,
And, crying 'I', would have the world
say 'I',
And all things perish so if she endure.
'If thou be'st Buddh,' she said, 'let
others grope

Lightless; it is enough that
 Thou art Thou
 Changelessly; rise and take the
 bliss of gods
 Who change not, heed not, strive not.
 But Buddh spake,
 'The right in thee is base, the wrong
 a curse;
 Cheat such as love themselves.' Then
 came wan Doubt,
 He that denies—the mocking Sin—
 and this
 Hissed in the Master's ear, 'All things
 are shows,
 And vain the knowledge of their vanity;
 Thou dost but chase the shadow of
 thyself;
 Rise and go hence, there is no
 better way
 Than patient scorn, nor any help
 for man,
 Nor any staying of his whirling wheel.'
 But quoth our Lord, 'Thou hast no
 part with me,
 False Visikitcha! subtlest of man's foes.'
 And third came she who gives dark
 creeds their power,
 Sīlabbat-paramāsa, sorceress,
 ... 'Wilt thou dare,' she said,
 'Put by our sacred books, dethrone
 our gods,
 Unpeople all the temples, shaking
 down
 That law which feeds the priests and
 props the realms?'
 But Buddha answered, 'What thou
 bidd'st me keep
 Is form which passes, but the free
 Truth stands;
 Get thee unto thy darkness.' ...
 Lo! Kāma waved his magic bow, and lo!
 The band of dancers opened, and a
 shape,
 Fairest and stateliest of the throng,
 came forth

Wearing the guise of sweet
 Yasodhara...
 Brimming with tears; yearning those
 outspread arms...
 Sighing, 'My Prince! I die for lack of
 thee!
 What heaven hast thou found like that
 we knew...
 Return, Siddhartha! ah! return...'
 ... But Buddh said,
 'For that sweet sake of her thou playest
 thus,
 Fair and false Shadow! is thy playing
 vain;
 I curse thee not who wear'st a form so
 dear,
 Yet as thou art so are all earthly shows.
 Melt to thy void again!' ...
 But Buddh heeded not,
 Sitting serene, with perfect virtue
 walled...
 Lo! the Dawn
 Sprang with Buddh's victory!...
 and Devas in the air
 Cried 'It is finished, finished!' ...
 Then he arose—radiant, rejoicing,
 strong—
 Beneath the Tree, and lifting high his
 voice
 Spake this...
 Many a house of life
 Hath held me—seeking ever him who
 wrought
 These prisons of the senses,
 sorrow-fraught;
 Sore was my ceaseless strife!
 But now,
 Thou builder of this tabernacle—Thou!
 I know thee! Never shalt thou build
 again
 These walls of pain,...
 Broken thy house is,...
 Safe pass I thence—deliverance to
 obtain. □

Madhusudana Saraswati on the Bhagavad-Gita

SWAMI GAMBHIRANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue)

HOW TO WORK

Thus, even though there is similarity in the performance of actions, the distinction between the unenlightened and the enlightened persons has been stated from the points of view of deep attachment to the idea of agentship and its absence. Now by stating that even an unenlightened man who hankers after Liberation has a distinction—in the form of dedication to God and absence of the desire for results—from one who is not an aspirant to Liberation, He emphasizes that Arjuna is fit for actions since he is unenlightened:

मयि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्याध्यात्मचेतसा ।
निराशीर्निर्ममो भूत्वा युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः ॥

*Mayi sarvāṇi karmāṇi
sannyasyādhyātmacetasā;
Nirāśīr'nirmamo bhūtvā
yudhyasva vigatajvaraḥ. (3.30)*

By becoming free from desires, devoid of the idea of 'mine' and devoid of the fever of the soul, engage in battle by dedicating all actions to Me with (your) mind spiritually imbued.

Bhūtvā, by becoming; *nirāśīḥ*, free from desires; *nirmamaḥ*, devoid of the idea of 'mine' with regard to your own body, children, brothers, and so on; and *vigata-jvaraḥ*, devoid of the fever of the soul—the word *jvara* (fever) is used to mean sorrow, because it causes suffering—, devoid of sorrows, of this world and the next, in the form

of infamy, falling into hell, etc.; you, who are desirous of Liberation, *yudhyasva*, engage in battle—the idea is, you undertake the prescribed duties—; *sannyasya*, by dedicating; *sarvāṇi-karmāṇi*, all actions, all kinds of actions mundane and Vedic; *mayi*, to Me, to Vāsudeva, who am God, the supreme Lord, omniscient, the Controller of all, the Self of all; *adhyātma-cetasā*, with your mind (*cetas*) spiritually imbued—(i.e.) with the idea, 'I, as an agent under the inner Controller, perform actions for that God alone, as (does) a servant for a king.'

Here the dedication to God and desirelessness are common to all actions of the person desirous of Liberation. It is to be noted that freedom from the idea of 'mine' and the casting off of sorrows refer merely to the battle under discussion; for, the idea of 'mine' and sorrows in other contexts are not under discussion.

The performance of enjoined actions without desire for results, and with the idea of dedication to God, leads to the fruit of Liberation through the stages of purification of the mind and attainment of Knowledge. This is what He says:

ये मे मतमिदं नित्यमनुतिष्ठन्ति मानवाः ।
श्रद्धावन्तोऽनसूयन्तो मुच्यन्ते तेऽपि कर्मभिः ॥

*Ye me matamidam nityam-
anutisthanti mānavāḥ;*

*Śraddhāvanto'nasūyanto
mucyante te'pi karmabhiḥ. (3.31)*

Those men who follow always this teaching of Mine with faith and without cavil, they also become freed from actions.

Ye mānavāḥ, those men, whoever they may be—men are mentioned because they are eligible for actions—; who *anutīṣṭhanti*, follow; *idam matam me*, this teaching of Mine—consisting in the performance of enjoined actions without desire for results—; *nityam*, which having been taught by the eternal (*nitya*) Vedas is beginningless and has come down traditionally; or, which is essential; or, always; *śraddhāvantaḥ*, with faith—*śraddhā* means the belief 'this is indeed so' with regard to what is taught by the scriptures and the teachers, even though this may not have been realized; being possessed of that—; *anasūyantaḥ*, without cavil—*asūyā* means finding fault in what is good, and it takes the form: 'This one is uncompassionate. He impels me to sorrowful actions'; without entertaining that cavil, which may in the context under discussion possibly arise against Me, Vāsudeva, the Teacher and the friend of all—; *te api*, they also, like the man of full realization; *mucyante*, become freed; *karmabhiḥ*, from actions, called righteous or unrighteous, through purification of the mind and rise of Knowledge.

Having thus spoken of the merits from a positive point of view, He states the defects from a negative standpoint:

*ये त्वेतदभ्यसूयन्तो नानुतिष्ठन्ति मे मतम् ।
सर्वज्ञानविमूढांस्तान्चिद्धि नष्टानचेतसः ॥*

*Ye tvetadabhyasūyanto
nānutīṣṭhanti me matam;*

*Sarvajñānavimūdhānstaṇ
viddhi naṣṭānacetasaḥ. (3.32)*

But those who, decrying this, do not follow My teaching, know them—who are of impure minds and (hence) are variously deluded about all knowledge—to have gone to ruin.

The word *tu*, but, indicates faithlessness, which is opposed to the quality of a man of faith. Hence, *ye*, those who, because of heresy, are faithless; *na*, do not follow; *etat*, this; *matam*, teaching of Mine; *abhyasūyantaḥ*, by decrying it, by inventing defects in it; *viddhi*, know; *tān*, them; *acetasaḥ*, who are of impure minds; and, for this very reason, *sarva-jñāna-vimūdhān*, who are variously deluded about all knowledge, who are deluded—with regard to the validity of proof, with regard to the subject matter, and with regard to the necessity—in respect of all knowledge concerning actions and the qualified and the unqualified Brahman, who are unfit in every way; *naṣṭān*, to have gone to ruin, as deprived of all the human ends.

(*Arjuna*:) Being aware of the danger in violating Your rule as in that of a king, why do they who cavil not follow Your direction, and why do they set their face against attaining all the human goals?

Hence He says:

*सदृशं चेष्टते स्वस्याः प्रकृतेर्ज्ञानवानपि ।
प्रकृतिं यान्ति भूतानि निग्रहः किं करिष्यति ॥*

*Sadrśam ceṣṭate svasyāḥ
prakṛterjñānavānapi;
Prakṛtiṁ yānti bhūtāni
nigrahaḥ kiṁ kariṣyati. (3.33)*

(Continued on page 282)

Sri Ramakrishna Touched Them:

Asvinikumar Datta

SWAMI PRABHANANDA

Those who received Sri Ramakrishna's grace found all their potentialities fully flowering in course of time in every case accompanied with deep spiritual stirrings within. Asvinikumar was one of those fortunate persons. Below we have his biographical sketch by an author widely known for his penchant for delving into the history of the Ramakrishna Movement.

Before he turned eighteen years old, a bright young man Asvinikumar Datta, a student of BA fourth year, Presidency College, Calcutta, created a stir. He approached his Principal with a confession that startled the latter: Whereas the University regulations prescribed sixteen plus as the minimum age of the Entrance examination, Asvini had taken the examination when he was only 14, and also secured a scholarship of Rs. 15/- per month! Though he had creditably passed the FA examination and was now preparing for his BA examination, the pricks of conscience had goaded him to see the Principal and confess his guilt of declaring himself to be older than he actually was. All pleadings by the Principal that he take lightly this slip failed. He decided to discontinue his studies till he attained the permissible age for BA examination. This just shows the moral fibre of the man who some year later was to build a model institution for character-building in the town of Barisal, Bangladesh.

Though the British Press branded him a mischievous political agitator, the intelligentsia as well as the illiterate masses knew him to be an educationist, patriot and 'lover of God and a man of God'.¹ His meeting with Sri Ramakrishna was a landmark in his life. They met at a time which had a tendency to doubt that all the superhuman per-

sonalities of history ever existed. While most people took shelter behind the walls of prejudice, even of irrational rituals, many of the English educated intellectuals took pride in suspecting religion.

But it was also a time that saw a spurt in religious activities, even the birth and growth of a new religion called Brahmoism. Like many other young men, Asvini in his youth was an admirer of the Brahmo movement, at that time under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen. More than the movement, it was the charismatic personality of Keshab Chandra which left a deep impress on his life and activities. Later he himself admitted, 'Imitating Keshab unconsciously, I have been so much influenced (by him) as perhaps by no one else.'² A similar idea was echoed in Dr. Mahendralal Sircar's deliberation before the syndicate of the Calcutta University when he spoke of Asvinikumar as the 'Keshabchandra of East Bengal'.³

1. Article by Bipin Chandra Pal published in *Mahatma Asvinikumar Smaranika* (Bengali), 1970, p. 69; hereafter *Smaraika*.

2. Ed. Sudhir Kumar Gangopadhyay and others, *Banglar Manisha* (Bengali), vol. II, 1987, p. 448.

3. Asvinikumar Datta, *Bhaktiyoga* (Bengali), Chakraborty, Chatterjee & Co., Calcutta 12, 20th edn., Appendix, p. 3; hereafter *Bhakti-*

Born in an upper middle class family at the sub-divisional town of Patuakhali in the district of Barisal, Bangladesh, on 25 January 1856, Asvinikumar began his primary education in Batajore village. He passed his Entrance examination in 1870 from Rangpur High School, and FA examination from Presidency College, Calcutta. As mentioned above, the bites of his conscience made him suspend his further education, and he took his BA examination from Krishnanagar College only when he reached the permissible age. He secured his MA and BL degrees in 1879 and 1880 respectively. Some years earlier, i.e. in April 1876, he had married Saralabala Devi, daughter of Chandra-kumar Roy.

His mother Prasannamayee, a pious lady, and his father Brajamohan (1825–

Though Asvinikumar had dedicated himself heart and soul to the cause of education, he sought a release from the romantic fix that dominated the psyche of contemporary educated youth; in fact, his soul pined for genuine love of God.

1888), who retired as a District Judge, had exercised tremendous influence in the formation of his character. His father's dictum, 'I shall rather be the first man in a village than the second in Rome'⁴, made an indelible impression on his young mind. Once young Asvini harboured the idea of joining government service as a Deputy Magistrate, but his father Brajamohan intervened. He wrote him, 'Yet I pray to God, my son, that no one of my family becomes a government servant as I did.' Asvini first served as Headmaster of Chatra High English School, Srirampore, Hooghly, for seven months. Though his stay there was short, it brought about some radical im-

provement in the school. On his return to Barisal in January 1880 he began practising law.⁵

At the behest of Ramesh Chandra Dutta, the then Commissioner of Dhaka Division, Asvini started a High English School in the town of Barisal on 27 June 1884. His father, who was staying at Hardwar, blessed the project. After some years Asvini upgraded the school to a degree college on 14 June 1889. Dedicated primarily to the cause of character building, the institution, with its motto of truth, love and purity, stands out as a permanent memorial to the great educationist Asvinikumar. Mr. Beatson Bell, the District Magistrate of Barisal, felt proud to declare Barisal as the Oxford of East Bengal.⁶ Instead of earning money from this institution, Asvinikumar himself bore the annual deficits for years together. Though he had totally identified himself with this institution he was not cloaking ambition in altruism when he said, 'The history of this institution is the true story of my life.'⁷ He had no issue, and so all the pupils of the school and the college became his own, as it were. Observed Bipin Chandra Pal in 1909, 'His students are spread all over Eastern Bengal today, occupying important positions in various walks of life; and it is these men who really constitute the very backbone of the Nationalistic Movement in that Province.'⁸

His magnetic personality easily turned Barisal into a stronghold of the boycott movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905. For many years past he was held as the idol of the people of Barisal; his words

5. Though he had a roaring success he practised law seriously for three years only. He worked for another six years, but most of his energies were directed towards public welfare activities.

6. *Smaranika*, p. 54.

7. *Banglar Manisha*, vol. II, p. 452.

8. *Smaranika*, p. 70.

yoga.

4. A well known statement by Caesar.

were law to the people. Traders refused to sell foreign cloth even to European officials.⁹ Truly observed Bipin Chandra Pal, '...While the Magistrate was the ruler of the district, Asvinikumar really controlled the sentiments and activities of the people.'¹⁰

Though Asvinikumar had dedicated himself heart and soul to the cause of education, he sought a release from the romantic fix that dominated the psyche of contemporary educated youth; in fact, his soul pined for genuine love of God. However, overemphasis on intellectual pursuits, as by the Brahmo leaders, could hardly satisfy him. In the meantime he heard of Sri Ramakrishna. Also he read about him.

Little wonder Sri Ramakrishna was dubbed the 'mad priest of Dakshineswar' by some contemporaneous Calcuttans whereas several eminent religious practitioners were pleading that his claims of harmony of religions be fairly examined. And devotees in general competed for his touch and blessings.

Most of the Brahmo leaders, though already weakened by several schisms among themselves, held Sri Ramakrishna in high esteem. Many of them considered Sri Ramakrishna an ideal Brahmo. But Sri Ramakrishna remained what he was. A true hermeneutician in his practice of religious discipline, upholding the value and sanctity of each tradition, Sri Ramakrishna verified God-consciousness in Hinduism as practised by its different sects as well as in Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. The following two statements, pregnant with immense possibilities, seem to represent the conclusions of his daring experimentations. He

said on 22 October 1882, 'I had to practise each religion for a time—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Saktas, Vaishnavas and Vedantists. I realized that there is only one God towards whom all are travelling; but the paths are different.'¹¹

Also he said on 19 September 1884, 'I have practised the disciplines of all the

The faithful hunger for signs and wonders. Faith is relatively easy if one stands in front of a miracle. The real test of faith is when there are no signs.

paths, each for a few days. Otherwise I should have found no peace of mind. I have practised all the disciplines: I accept all the paths. I respect the Saktas, the Vaishnavas and also the Vedantists. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern Brahmajnanis (Brahmos).'¹² Asvinikumar made up his mind to see the Paramahansa, as he was popularly known among the Brahmosees, at the earliest opportunity.

The opportunity came during the autumn holidays of 1881. One day he went to Dakshineswar where the Paramahansa lived. Circumstantial evidences confirm that it was Friday, 7 October 1881.¹³ Travell-

11. 'M.', *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York Edn., p. 129; hereafter *The Gospel*.

12. *The Gospel*, p. 538.

13. Asvinikumar's reminiscences mention 'Keshab Babu was to come that day'. The *Indian Mirror* dated the 9th October 1881 announced that 'Friday was the day set apart for our (Brahmo Samaj's) autumnal festival. So we went to Dakshineswar to pass a few hours in a friendly talk with the good Paramahansa....' More than fifty gentlemen were present. It was an annual feature. This particular day was a full moon day. It was

9. The British District Magistrate made a written request to Asvinikumar seeking permission to purchase a piece of Manchester shirting. Only on receipt of the same could the European official purchase it. (*Banglar Manisha*, vol. II, p. 452)

10. *Smaranika*, p. 72

ing by boat he reached the landing *ghat*, climbed the steps and enquired about the Paramahamsa. Following the respondent's



Asvinikumar Datta

hint he went forward to find a man sitting reclining against a bolster. He was sitting on the north verandah facing the garden. At his right sat a gentleman, named Rajendralal Mitra,¹⁴ later an Assistant Secretary to the Government of Bengal. There were some other persons sitting nearby. Autumn was still in the air, and the sparkling sun overhead had made the Panchabati grove luxuriously warm.

As he moved closer, he found the Paramahamsa, half leaning against the bolster with his hands clasped around his drawn-up knees. Though the articles Sri Ramakrishna was using at that time—such as a black-bordered dhoti, bolster and so

forth which are generally considered characteristic of one inclined to luxury—were deterrants to accepting him as a Paramahamsa, it became clear that he was not used to pillows as gentlemen are. After exchange of greetings Sri Ramakrishna noticed Asvini standing, watching him, curiosity writ large on his face. He read the in and out of the new arrival.

Unaware that Keshab was expected to visit the saint that day, Asvini found the Paramahamsa over-anxious for Keshab: now and then he was sending one man or another to see if Keshab's boat was in view.¹⁵ Sri Ramakrishna's conduct reminded him of Srimati Radha who used to strain her ears to hear of some sign of Sri Krishna's coming. Sri Ramakrishna humourously observed, 'You see, Keshab always tantalizes me like this. It is his way.' *Keshab* here carries a double meaning: the first is the sweet-heart of Srimati Radha, and the second is Keshab Chandra Sen, the beloved admirer of Sri Ramakrishna.

After a fairly long wait Keshab and his party arrived. It was already dusk. Asvini was very curious to witness the meeting of those two great lovers of God. We quote below from a letter of Asvinikumar the first few minutes of this historic meeting. He wrote,

Keshab bowed low before the Master, touching the ground with his forehead. The Master returned his salutation in the same manner. Shortly afterwards Sri Ramakrishna said, in a state of partial consciousness, 'Look! He has brought the whole Calcutta crowd. I am supposed to deliver a lecture. I won't do anything of the sort. Do it yourself if you like. Lecturing is none of my business.'

Still in the ecstatic mood, he said with a divine smile: 'I shall eat, drink and be merry. I shall play and sleep. But I can't

7 October 1881.

14. Sri Ramakrishna visited Rajendralal Mitra's house on Saturday, 10 December 1881.

15. *The Gospel*, p. 1022.

give lectures.'

As Keshab Babu watched him, he became overpowered with divine emotion. Every now and then he said, 'Ah me! Ah me!'

I too watched the Master and said to myself, 'Can this be pretence?' I had never seen anything like it before, and you know how deep my faith is.¹⁶

The faithful hunger for signs and wonders. Faith is relatively easy if one stands in front of a miracle. The real test of faith is when there are no signs. It was really difficult for the visitor to make an objective assessment of the Paramahansa. The *Indian Mirror* of 9 October 1881 reported that the subject of the Paramahansa's talk, was the renunciation of the puny ego.¹⁷ Two obstacles lie in the path of spiritual progress—the attachment to lust and lucre. The Paramahansa discussed whether it was possible for a regenerated man to live in the world and yet be above it. The largest portion of what he said was taken up with illustrations from the commonest incidents of life; familiar sights and common place details. The flow of words that came out from the lips of the Paramahansa was like southern breeze that brought peace as well as joy in the minds of all present. One hour or so passed.

Soon after Asvinikumar witnessed a scene about which he wrote, 'What I saw then I shall never forget either in this life or in the lives to come.'¹⁸ Everybody danced, Keshab included, in a circle with the Master in the centre. While dancing Sri Ramakrishna sang with a melodious voice with intense feeling, sometimes improvising some joyous phrase. As the emotion

deepened, Sri Ramakrishna suddenly stood motionless, transfixed in samadhi. The atmosphere was charged with ecstatic joy. A long time passed.

After hearing his words and seeing all that happened, Asvini concluded, 'Yes, a Paramahansa indeed!'

Asvini returned home gathering a rich treasure of experiences,¹⁹ spiritual and secular, which worked imperceptibly in his mind and unmistakably changed his outlook to some extent. But what seemed a small change in his exterior behaviour mirrored a much more radical alteration in his psychological contours.

Asvini visited the Master four or five times, the last one being on 23 May 1885. During these few visits, however, he had become quite intimate. He felt as if he and the Paramahansa had been classmates, although the saint of Dakshineswar was 45 and the young pleader of Barisal was only 25. But the Paramahansa's impact turned the radical ideologue that he was into a practical and rational reformer. That he tried consciously to put into practice some of the Paramahansa's precepts became transparent. By way of illustrations only we quote from his *Bhaktiyoga*. There he said, 'The thought of Mother is a special aid to control the sex desire...to a *jnani*, every woman is like his own mother, the sight of a woman fills his heart with pure thoughts. How can lust have a hold over such a mind? All of you know, Ramakrishna Paramahansa never had any physical relationship with his wife.'²⁰

Though every meeting with Sri Ramakrishna was quite significant, some among them, especially the first and the third ones, are very relevant and essential in understanding the interaction between Sri Ramakrishna and Asvini.

16. Ibid.

17. Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and others (Ed.), *Samasamayik Dristite Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa* (Bengali), p. 23.

18. *The Gospel*, p. 1023.

19. Asvini is not known to have maintained a diary.

20. *Bhaktiyoga*, p. 76.

On the first occasion he could see Sri Ramakrishna's lively encounter with Keshab Chandra Sen and his associates. A spring of joy that Sri Ramakrishna was, the encounter turned into a mart of joy. Keshab was two years younger than Sri Ramakrishna and the former was reckoned as one of the most famous men in India; and Asvini, a staunch admirer of Keshab, was amazed to find the latter sitting at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna and listening with rapt attention to whatever fell from his lips. The love and reverence with which Keshab held Sri Ramakrishna taught him a lesson.

The third meeting on a hot summer afternoon was an intimate one. Fortunately, Asvini was alone with the Paramahansa. Asked by the Paramahansa, Asvini brought him a bottle of lemonade; the latter relished it like a child. During the conversation the Paramahansa told in answer to his query the difference between a Hindu and a Brahmo. He said, 'There is not much difference. In the serenade we have here, one flutist plays a single note right along, while another plays various melodies. The Brahmos play one note, as it were; they hold to the formless aspect of God. But the Hindus bring out different melodies; that is to say, they enjoy God in His various aspects.'²¹

During discussion Sri Ramakrishna, however, did not miss to put forward his major teachings. He explained, 'The Reality is one. People give it various names. Take the case of a lake with four landing-ghats on its four banks. People who draw water at one ghat call it *jal*; and those who draw it at the second ghat will call it *pani*. At the third ghat they call it water, and at the fourth *acqua*. But it is one and the same thing: water.'

At one stage, Asvini referred to his meeting with Achalananda Tirthavadhut, alias Ramkumar of Kotrung, Hooghly, an old acquaintance of Sri Ramakrishna.

Childlike, Sri Ramakrishna instantly asked him, 'Well, whom do you like better—him or me?'²² Asvini replied, 'Oh, can there be any comparison between you two? He is a scholar, an erudite person; but are you one?' Seeing him a 'little puzzled' Asvini made it up by saying, 'He may be a scholar, but you are full of fun! There is great fun in your company.' The Master appreciated much the visitor's observation. His observation was substantiated further by a small inci-

Charmed by the Paramahansa's unconditional love and genuine concern for others, Asvini developed a deeper need to call on God. The Paramahansa had instilled in him the feeling that God is to be considered a very near and dear one.

dent which followed.

Funnily enough, Sri Ramakrishna stretched himself on his cot and unhesitatingly asked Asvini to fan him. Asvini obliged. As it was a hot day Sri Ramakrishna suggested he dip the fan in water. Conveying his approbation of the Paramahansa's conduct Asvini observed, 'Ah! You have your fancies, too.' Smilingly the Paramahansa drawled out, 'And—why not?' 'Very well!', Asvini said, 'Have your full measure of them.'

No doubt Asvini immensely enjoyed this particular visit. Though he took much liberty while speaking with him, as soon as he left his presence he mentally reviewed all that had actually happened. It then flashed on him, 'Goodness gracious! Think where I have been!'

However, the day was not spent in fun and merrymaking only. As was his wont Sri

21. *The Gospel*, p. 1024.

22. Those who have studied Sri Ramakrishna's biography carefully must have noticed that Sri Ramakrishna used to ask such questions just to have an idea of the visitor's power of understanding.

Ramakrishna boldly and clearly advised him how to improve the quality of his spiritual life. He emphasized sincere practice of spiritual discipline. Also he said forcefully that he (Asvini) should create a roseate intoxication in his mind with the thought of God, and live in the world like a maidservant in a richman's house; and that to protect himself in the world, he should 'smear his being with the oil of devotion'. Charmed by the Paramahansa's unconditional love and genuine concern for others, Asvini developed a deeper need to call on God. The Paramahansa had instilled in him the feeling that God is to be considered a very near and dear one.

Learning from Asvini, his father Brajamohan Datta had gone to Dakshineswar, one day to see the Paramahansa. He stayed there for three days.²³ Sri Ramakrishna's estimate of him, in his own words, was: 'A nice man. But now and then he talks nonsense!' His presence of mind prompted Asvini to plead for his father: 'Please help him get over it when you see him next.' It seems Sri Ramakrishna did not get another opportunity to help Brajamohan.

Asvinikumar was known as a great educationist, a pillar of the nationalist movement, and the creator of modern Barisal. But those who knew him intimately revered and loved him as one whose heart yearned for direct experience of God. Contact with Sri Ramakrishna threw up a spark of spirituality which inflamed the rudiments of *bhakti* he cherished in his heart. Henceforth he was often seen burning with

the fire of love for God; and it manifested in various forms. In 1885-86 Asvinikumar gave a series of lectures on the principles of bhakti in Brajamohan Vidyalaya. The notes one of his admirers kept resulted in the publication of *Bhaktiyoga* (Bengali) which is considered one of the best on the subject.

In this book the author observed, 'The worship of the goddess Kali filled him (Sri Ramakrishna) with bhakti of the most selfless type, surging through his heart like the holy stream of the Ganges.'²⁴ Eulogized by scholars such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rajnarayan Bose, Dwijendranath Thakur, and several others, this volume, rooted in the ancient literature on bhakti in India, is replete with the personal experiences of the author. Very aptly Bipin Chandra Pal observed, 'It is in this book...that we see the inner soul of Asvinikumar.'²⁵ It was followed by *Karmayoga*, *Prema*, *Durgotsava-tattva*, *Atma-pratistha*, all based on his lectures given on different occasions. As a composer of national songs he became quite popular. People remember him especially because his books moulded the life of countless men and women.

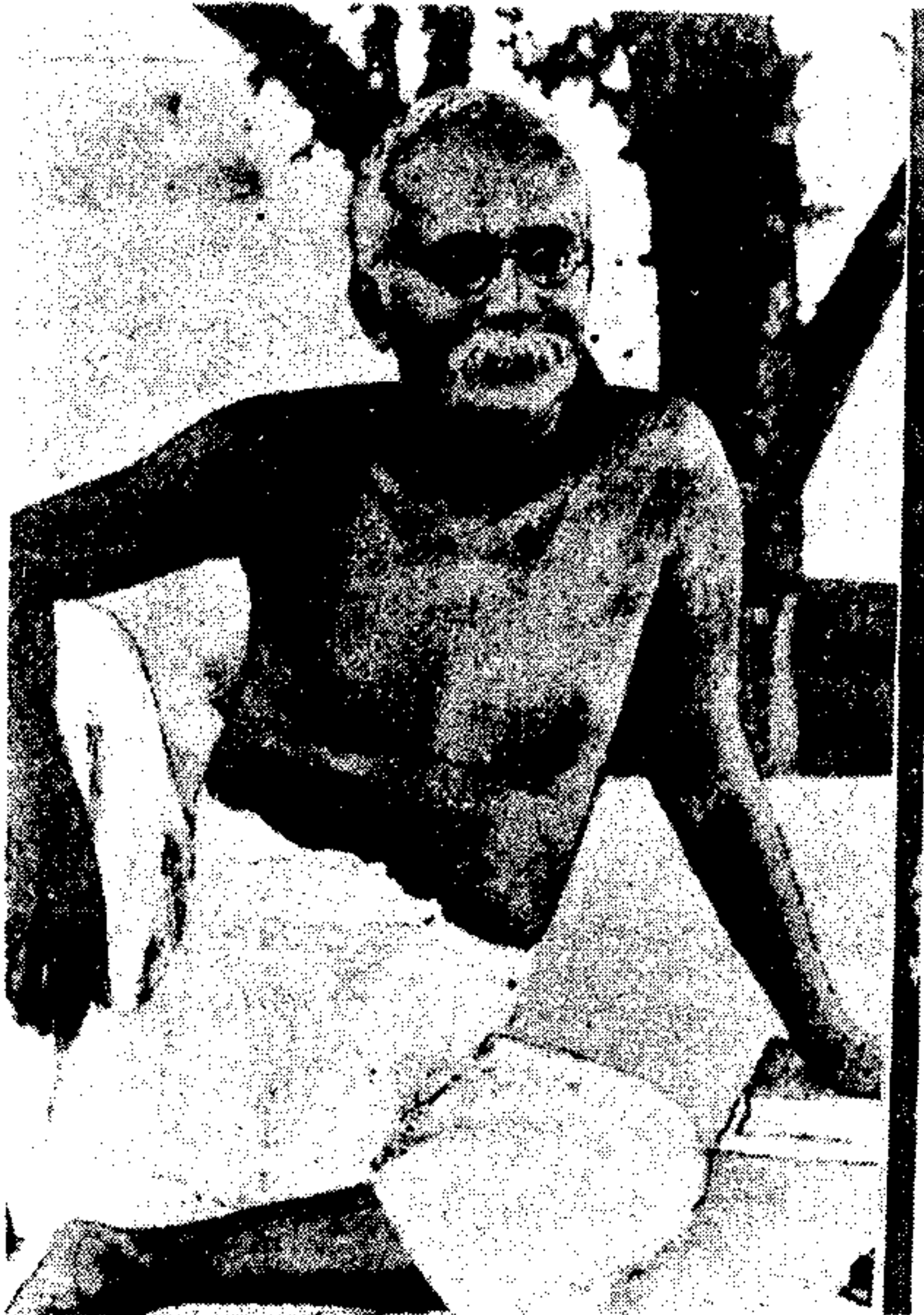
Before we proceed further, we need to pay attention to the rapid change that came about in the life of another personality under the benign influence of the Paramahansa. A descendent of Advaita Acharya, Vijaykrishna Goswami (1841-99) had become disillusioned with his hereditary religious practices, joined the Brahmo movement and dedicated himself enthusiastically to its cause. Following the dictates of his conscience he took a leading part in the episodes leading to trisection of the Brahmo movement. But Vijaykrishna's awakened spiritual hankerings, particularly

23. Swami Shivananda, a monastic disciple of the Master, saw Brajamohan on this occasion. Later he reminisced about him, 'We saw his (Asvini's) father visit the Master....He came to the Master and begged for his blessings when he was planning to found a college. He was a fine man.' (Swami Shivananda, *For Seekers of God*, tr. by Swami Vividishananda, 1947, p. 48.)

24. Asvinikumar Datta, *Bhaktiyoga* (tr. by Gunada Charan Sen), Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1959; p. 171.

25. *Smaranika*, p. 71.

when he came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, could not remain satisfied. Some years along the line he returned to the worship of the Personal God. That created a furore in Sadharan Brahmo Samaj of which he was a salaried preacher. Sri Ramakrishna, on the other hand, appreciating the changes in Vijaykrishna and his guileless, straight-



In later life

forward and liberal attitude observed on 19 September 1884, 'Vijay is in a wonderful state of mind nowadays. He falls to the ground while chanting the name of Hari. He devotes himself to *kirtan*, meditation and other spiritual practices till four in the morning. He now puts on an ochre robe and prostrates himself before the images of God.'²⁶

The furore notwithstanding, Vijaykrishna went on assuring all through his letters as well as through public statements that he continued to be a Brahmo. As a typical example, we may quote his public state-

ment made on 13 May 1886. There he wrote, 'Whatever is truth is Brahmoism. It is a universal religion. It is non-sectarian. For this reason wherever I find truth, and what I understand as truth I unhesitatingly welcome it.'²⁷ Nevertheless, criticisms against him within the Brahmo Samaj grew strong. So, on 17 May 1886²⁸ he submitted his formal letter of resignation from the Samaj. This was officially accepted by the executive committee of Sadharan Brahmo Samaj.

On his return from Gaya after some time spent in solitude and holy company Sri Ramakrishna was happy to notice a sea-change in him. He said, 'The spring in Vijay's heart had been covered all these days. Now it is open.'²⁹ He encouraged Vijay to move forward. He advised him, 'It is now time for you to give up everything. Renounce all and say, "O mind, may you and I alone behold the Mother, letting no one else intrude", surrender yourself completely to God and set aside such things as fear and shame.'³⁰ Sri Ramakrishna not only advised Vijay but lent his moral support whenever needed. In the meantime, Sri Ramakrishna's greatness had dawned on him. On 25 September 1885 Vijaykrishna openly declared, 'I realize that everything is here where we are sitting now...At other places I have seen two, five, ten or twenty-five per cent of him at the most. Here alone I find the full one hundred per cent manifestation of God.'³¹

Happy to notice the desirable transformation as well as a satisfactory spiritual progress in Vijay, Sri Ramakrishna wanted him to share the work ordained by the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna prayed to Her to grant a 'little power' to Vijay so that

26. *The Gospel*, pp. 538-9.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

28. Yogendranath Gupta, *Mahapurush Vijaykrishna* (Bengali), 1956, p. 240.

29. *The Gospel*, p. 314.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 315-16.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 880-1.

he could help those people before they finally came to him (Sri Ramakrishna) for spiritual awakening.³² Subsequently Vijaykrishna turned into a powerful instrument for revitalizing Neo-Vaishnavism, which attracted many intellectuals including Asvinikumar who took spiritual initiation from him in 1886. Thus Sri Ramakrishna's magnetic personality profoundly influenced Asvinikumar directly as hinted above, as also indirectly through Vijaykrishna Goswami. It strengthened his moral life and made his spiritual ideals clearer, thus enriching his spiritual life.

Though Asvinikumar took to politics, the mainspring of his inspirations was spirituality. The partition of Bengal changed him from a moderate to an extremist. Historian Dr. R.C. Mazumdar observed, 'Even the high-souled devotee Asvinikumar Dutt of Barisal approved of terrorism, at least as a means of awakening the country from age-long torpor or slumber'.³³ He was deported in December 1908 and detained in Lucknow Jail till 9 February 1910. But the touch he received from Sri Ramakrishna continued its spell throughout his life. Once Asvinikumar remarked, 'As long as I was with the Paramahansa, I felt I was struggling to stay afloat, as it were, in an ocean of bliss.'³⁴

Way back in May 1885 Asvini at the behest of Sri Ramakrishna had tried to meet Narendra. As the latter had a severe headache that day the meeting proved to be infructuous. As if to fulfil the wish of Sri Ramakrishna, it was by chance that Asvinikumar met Narendra, then the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda, at Almora in 1898.³⁵ Narendra's recalling the abortive meeting and expressing his regret

impressed him deeply. Conversation with Narendra led Asvinikumar to remark finally, 'Today you rise higher than ever in any estimation. Now I realize why you are a world-conqueror and why the Master loved you so much.'³⁶

Not only Swami Vivekananda, but other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were always held in high esteem by Asvinikumar. When Swami Saradananda, another direct disciple of the Master visited Barisal from the 4th to 12th January 1900, Asvinikumar gave him a rousing reception and introduced the Swami at a public meeting, saying, 'Paramahamsadeva's infinite grace produced not only the world-moving Vivekananda but has made everyone of them similar to Vivekananda.'³⁷

Under the rippled surface of a very active life one could see the tranquil lake of bhakti in the inmost depth of Asvinikumar's heart. Bhakti was integral to his being. It suffused the life of this great *karmayogin* which ended on 7 November 1923 at Calcutta.³⁸

Reading the fourth volume of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* by 'M.' in 1910 rekindled Asvinikumar's memories of his few meetings with Sri Ramakrishna. He wrote back to 'M.', 'What I saw and received in those few days has sweetened my whole

32. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, pp. 760-1.

33. R.C. Mazumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, vol. II, 1963, p. 474.

34. *Bhaktiyoga*, Appendix, p. 8.

35. Asvinikumar mentioned in his letter to 'M.' that he met Narendra at Almora in 1897. But circumstantial evidences suggest that the two met several times at Almora itself when Swami Vivekananda was there between 17 May and 18 June 1898.

36. *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. II, p. 355.

37. Swami Prabhananda, *Saradanandacharit* (Bengali), 1955, p. 117.

38. Suffering from acute diabetes he was brought to Calcutta. He did not respond to the treatment and passed away. His body was cremated at Keoratala. (Jyotish Chandra Ghosal, *Asvini Kumar Datta* (Bengali), 2nd edn. p. 40.)

life. That Elysian smile of his, laden with nectar, I have locked up in the secret closet of my memory. That is the unending treasure of a hapless person like myself.³⁹

The fragrance of the Paramahansa's personality had sweetened Asvinikumar's life. Asvinikumar in turn shared his experience with others, sweetening their lives. □

39. *The Gospel*, p. 1027.

Madhusudana Saraswati on the Bhagavad-Gita

(Continued from page 272)

Even a man of wisdom behaves according to his own nature. Beings follow (their) nature. What can restraint do?

Prakṛti, nature, means the all-powerful impressions of righteousness, unrighteousness, knowledge, will, etc. that were acquired in past lives and are manifest in the present life, which fact is proved by the Śruti, 'It is followed by knowledge, work and past experience.'¹

All creatures, *jñānavān api*, even a man of wisdom—even a knower of Brahman or one who knows the difference between the good and the bad—what to speak of a fool!; *ceṣṭate*, behaves; *sadr̥śam*, according to that

nature of his own—which agrees with the maxim, '(In instinctive actions) there is no distinction from the animals etc.' (See Śaṅkarācārya's introduction to the *Brahma-Sūtras*.) Therefore, *bhūtāni*, beings, all creatures; *yānti*, follow; (their) *prakṛtim*, nature, even though it is the cause of beings deflected from the human goals. In that respect, *kim karisyati nigrahaḥ*, what will restraint do, be it Mine or of a king? That is to say, because of the intensity of attachment, that (restraint) is incapable of preventing one from evil. Those who owing to the predominance of bad impressions engage in evil, even though aware that it is the door to a great hell, are not afraid of the guilt of transgressing My directions. This is the idea.

1. *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad*, 4.4.2.

(to be continued)

What matters it if this little life goes? Everyone has to die, the saint or the sinner, the rich or the poor. The body never remains for anyone. Arise and awake and *be perfectly sincere*. Our insincerity in India is awful; what we want is character, that steadiness and character that make a man cling on to a thing like grim death.

—Swami Vivekananda

Religious Mysticism: Some Observations on the Poetry of Shamas Faqir

PROF. A. N. DHAR

With the advent of Islam in India, Persian studies gained popularity among the literary sections of the society, that included the Hindus and the Muslims alike. This led to an interchange of concepts from Vedanta and Sufism between the two communities. The Bhakti movement in India provided an additional stimulus to this process of interchange. The mystical poems of Shamas Faqir, the Sufi poet of note from the valley of Kashmir, exemplify this cultural synthesis in a remarkable way.

Mystical poetry in Kashmiri (spoken by the natives of the valley) has a richness and variety of its own, traceable to the mingling of several cultural streams. This intermingling is specially noticeable in the poems of Shamas Faqir, a spiritually enlightening study of which is presented below by the author from Jammu. He was the Head of the Department of English, University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

In this paper, I propose to discuss the religious mysticism with particular reference to Shamas Faqir, noted Sufi poet of Kashmir. We notice a pervasive mystical element in his lyrics (composed in Kashmiri) that is Sufi in content and inspiration, compatible with Islam and, at the same time, comparable in significant ways with other varieties of religious mysticism. In the introductory part, I shall first touch upon religious mysticism in general at some length and then give a brief account of Sufi mysticism in its bearing upon the poetry of Shamas Faqir.

Mysticism, of all shades, is not to be seen as something remote from religion. Essentially, it is a correlate of religion. The term 'religion' is generally taken to mean the observance of belief, which is commonly identified with mere ritual. The mystic, however, does not rest content with the bare externals of religion. He seeks to attain an intimate, loving relationship with the Divine—involving a personal 'encounter' aiming at 'union'. He is at once drawn to the ultimate Truth by a passionate curiosity and

an ardent love. His pursuit, therefore, inevitably involves the religious feeling at its most intense. In this respect, the great mystics of all times and climes are closely akin to the very founders of various faiths.¹

From the biographies of the renowned mystics of the world, supported by what has come down to us in the form of their sayings and writings, we gather that while some of them remained mostly absorbed in contemplation, the majority also practised love and piety as the benefactors of mankind in general. Unlike religious zealots, tied to this or that creed, they quietly pursued their own ways (as lone adventurers) though they continued to stay within their traditions. Only a small minority of them chose to dissociate themselves from orthodox creeds, asserted their freedom and even professed heretical views. Some of these unfettered mystics, like the Persian mystic Mansur-al-Hallaj, had to pay a heavy price for their non-conformist

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), p. 31.

views. The example of William Blake, poet and visionary, also comes to mind here as a unique mystic whose bold and unconventional pronouncements were not palatable to the orthodox Christians.

Across cultures, mysticism shares universal characteristics despite the variety it comprehends. That explains why the religious mystic is tolerant and accommodating as far as his attitude to other faiths is concerned. As the mystic advances in the spiritual path, whatever his affiliations, he realizes that all religions are one in essence and lead to the same goal. We, in India, are proud of being the inheritors of a rich culture, presenting a fine synthesis of diverse strands. The Hindu ethos itself has been largely responsible for this synthesis, conducive as it has been to free inquiry into the nature of Reality or Truth, and consequently

philosophical mysticism by Christian scholars.

Another feature that is specially common to Christian and Hindu mysticism is the theme of love between God and the soul conceived as a spousal relation. Interestingly, this theme has been elaborately dealt with in our literature devoted to Krishna and the *gopīs*. In fact, across cultures, human love has been a dominant *motif* in poetry of all hues including the mystical. Most mystics have looked upon earthly love itself as the root of spirituality, having in it the potential of transfiguring into divine love. This theme has been dealt with in a variety of ways in mystical literature throughout the world.

One more related feature common to most varieties of mysticism is the mystic's

Islam...thoroughly monotheistic, it has also stressed God's transcendence and man's creature-hood. This is something that does not seem compatible with mysticism—a dimension of religion that stands for an intimate relationship with the Divine. In actual fact, however, Islamic worship does not ignore the immanent aspect of God, including man's innate divinity. Those who uphold the Sufi path as the 'mystical dimension of Islam' assert that in the Koran itself there are several passages which affirm God's immanence and quite suggest the possibility of a close communion between the Maker and man.

to the flowering of the mystical sensibility.

The country has built up a rich mystical tradition going back to the Vedic times, which later absorbed the influence of the Sufi mystics (who in turn were themselves influenced by the cross-cultural interaction on the Indian soil). Having had a steady growth over centuries, our mystical literature involves a wide range of approaches to Reality. This is consistent with our cultural diversity. Of these approaches, Karma, Bhakti and Jñāna are specially characteristic of Hindu mysticism. Interestingly, they correspond to the types of spiritual life respectively termed practical, devotional and

account of his advancement in the spiritual path—of the various states he experiences and the stages he goes through until he attains his goal. In Christian mysticism, the spiritual 'journey' is depicted as consisting of three distinct phases—called the Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive stages of the Mystic Way. The corresponding concept in Hindu mysticism is that of 'Ascent of the Self', particularly stressed in Kundalini-yoga. While mystical union is conceived in the Hindu scriptures, including the Upanishads, as the complete merger of the individual soul with God, for the Christian mystics it implies the soul's experience of the constant presence of God. We find paral-

lel—if not identical—accounts of the Mystical Way and all that it involves in Sufi Mysticism, too.

Islam, as a world, religion, has laid utmost emphasis on the oneness of God. Thus thoroughly monotheistic, it has also stressed God's transcendence and man's creaturehood. This is something that does not seem compatible with mysticism—a dimension of religion that stands for an intimate relationship with the Divine. In actual fact, however, Islamic worship does not ignore the immanental aspect of God, including man's innate divinity. Those who uphold the Sufi path as the 'mystical dimension of Islam'² assert that in the *Koran* itself there are several passages which affirm God's immanence and quite suggest the possibility of a close communion between the Maker and man.³ It is on this account that they justify the doctrine of *Irfān* or *Marifat* (spiritual gnosis) as also the practice of *Mahabba* (the Way of Love).

As the spiritual offspring of Islam, Sufism had its fine flowering on the Persian soil. The Sufi orders that grew up in Persia and other Islamic countries evolved approaches that were mutually coherent and also consistent with the essential spirit of Islam. Eschewing 'high and dry intellectualism',⁴ the Sufis, like the Christian saints, practised poverty and penance, preaching their doctrine through love and gentle persuasion. Although Islam does not encourage monasticism or renunciation of

household life, many Sufis spent their lives as wandering *faqirs*. The Sufi way had its impact not only on the Muslims themselves but it impressed the devout in other communities as well, leading to a healthy interaction and mutual accommodation, a thing borne out by what happened significantly in India. The receptiveness of the indigenous culture, specially characteristic of the Hindu ethos, and the liberal attitude of the Sufis have both contributed, in no small measure to the composite culture that continues to be our rich legacy.

Islamic mysticism in its literary form, largely Sufi in content and inspiration, found its adequate development in classical Persian poetry. The Persian poets showed remarkable ability in using the language of human love to convey mystical concepts related to the Divine. The terminology of erotic love particularly, used in relevant contexts, enabled them to give a hint of the 'rapture' (*wajd*) the mystic experiences within the depths of his soul. The Persian lyric, called the *ghazal*, evolved as an appropriate form in their hands for unfolding experiences profound and esoteric in nature, rooted in their mystical craving for union with God. Maulana Rumi, the supreme exponent of the Sufi Way, and other poets like Attār, Saidi, Hafiz and Jami, wrote excellent poetry using highly suggestive images charged with significance, which gave superb expression to the theme of divine love. The profane and the sacred are seen to intermingle in Sufi poetry as they, for example, do in the metaphysical lyrics of John Donne. Written seemingly in a voluptuous vein, they evoke and suggest what touches our inmost Being.

With the advent of Islam in India, Persian studies gained popularity among the literary sections of the society, that included the Hindus and the Muslims alike. This led to an interchange of concepts from Vedanta

2. Saiyid A. A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub., Pvt. Ltd., 1978), vol. 1, p. 18.

3. See A.J. Arberry, *Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1950; rpt. 1956), pp. 17, 27.

4. See Cyprian Prince, O.P., *The Persian Sufis* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964), p. 28.



A scenic background of the Kashmir valley



and Sufism between the two communities. The Bhakti movement in India provided an additional stimulus to this process of interchange. The mystical poems of Shamas Faqir, the Sufi poet of note from the valley of Kashmir, exemplify this cultural synthesis in a remarkable way.

Mystical poetry in Kashmiri (spoken by the natives of the valley) has a richness and variety of its own, traceable to the mingling of several cultural streams. Its growth began in the fourteenth century with the famous woman poet and saint, Lal Ded. It was in her time that Sufism first came to Kashmir through Muslim saints and mystics. Consistent with her Śaivite background, Lal Ded, in her *vākhs*, neither characterizes the world as illusory nor recommends external renunciation. She looks upon the objective universe as the *Svarūpa* Itself (the Real Form) that parallels the Sufi view of the physical world as *Wahadatulwajud*.

The great Muslim saint, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Rishi, of Chrari Sherif (Kashmir), revered by all communities in the valley and popularly called Nund Rishi, is believed to have been blessed and directly influenced by Lal Ded. This is confirmed by the reverential tribute he paid her in one of his *shruks* (*ślokas*)⁵. Mystical in thought and aphoristic in form, his *shruks* have impressed and influenced both the communities, Hindus and Muslims, in Kashmir as the *vākhs* of Lal Ded. Accordingly, in the mystical poetry that was produced mostly in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries (after a long gap, following the two saints), we notice an interfusion of parallel literary motifs and images drawn from diverse cultural sources. This intermingling is specially noticeable in the poems of Shamas Faqir (AD

1843–1901). It is also to be seen in varying degrees in the poems of a number of other Kashmiri poets.

No authentic biography of Shamas Faqir, with full details about his life including what his literary antecedents were, has been compiled so far. What has, therefore, to be depended upon most in this context is the text of ninety-six of his poems included in the anthology of Sufi poems in Kashmiri brought out by the J & K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar.⁶ The perceptive reader can gather many facts and draw useful inferences from them about the life and literary background of the poet.

As we gather from the scanty biographical information available, through his upbringing at home and later under the influence of several seasoned teachers Shamas Faqir was drawn towards divine contemplation during his early formative years. He got connected with the Qadri Sufi order and thereafter, around the age of twenty-five, he went to Amritsar in pursuit of spiritual knowledge. Here he came into contact with an accomplished Master, under whom he got fully conversant with the Sufi doctrine and practice. On his return to Kashmir, he got married and had four children. Yet he remained well set on the spiritual path and lived throughout in the true spirit of a Sufi saint.

An intensive reading of Shamas Faqir's poems reveals a lot to us about his religious background and the literary sources that must have inspired him. This in turn enables us to appreciate better his communicative skill as a mystical poet, precisely the tools he used to articulate his perceptions and experiences. As we get familiar with the

5. Quoted in B.N. Parimpoo, *The Ascent of Self* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2nd rev. edn., 1987), p. 6 (footnote no. 2).

6. See Motilal Saqi, ed., *Kashmir Sufi Shairi* (Srinagar: J & K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 311–439.

linguistic tools and the kind of imagery he employs, we conveniently judge for ourselves the main sources of his inspiration.

Thus the poem 'Nat', the first in the group of his poems available, indicates immediately that he is a devout Muslim, well acquainted with the teachings of Islam based on the *Koran* and also with the life of Prophet Mohammed. The poem 'Meraj-nama' that follows recounts the story of the Prophet's spiritual journey to the abode of God. In a number of other poems there is unmistakable evidence of the poet's awareness of the Mystic Way—of the steps and stages leading to Union that the Sufi Masters are believed to have gone through.

To the discerning reader, Shamas Faqir's description of the Sufi path must appear suggestively similar to the spiritual 'adventure' given in other varieties of religious mysticism (including Hindu and Christian mysticism). In several poems, he makes use of the *via-negativa* and *via-affirmativa* approaches in his accounts of the Divine. Each of these approaches to Reality involves a characteristic language use, which the poet accomplishes so well; sometimes we find the two approaches deftly interwoven in the same poem. In quite a few poems, we come across direct allusions to the Persian mystic, Mansur-ul-Hallaj, and the doctrine of *An-ul-Haq* (I am Truth) that he boldly preached.

The Sufi concepts of *fanā* (annihilation), *baqā* (continuity), the terms *zikir* (remembrance of God) and *fikir* (contemplation), the symbolism of the 'diver' in search of 'pearls', the images of *zulf* (seductive curl) and *khal* (the mole on the cheek of the Beloved) are seen to recur in many a poem. The imagery of *jām* (wine cup) and *mai-khana* (wine house) associated closely with *makhmur* (the 'intoxicated' mystic) is also recurrent in Shamas Faqir, linking him with his distant

predecessors, the Persian Sufi poets, in the background. It is they, in fact, who were the first to make innovative and creative use of language in starting the vogue of this imagery. At places, Shamas Faqir speaks of his experience of the inward music of the soul, of the 'vibrant string within', that reminds us of *anāhata* (unstrung sound) mentioned in Surat-Sabda Yoga.

A striking feature of Shamas Faqir's poems is the diction: using largely the Kashmiri idiom current in his time, he also employs words from Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. He can bend language to his needs, blending harmoniously words from diverse sources together—an achievement creative in a high degree. In some poems particularly, we notice that he makes a consistent use of terms (and related concepts) derived from the Hindu Śāstras (including both Vedānta and Śaiva texts) with remarkable ease and facility.

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As examples we may mention terms like *zāgrat* (wakefulness), *sopan* (dream), *sushapt* (deep sleep), *turya* (superconsciousness), terms relating to the four elements including *pavan* (air) and *ākāśa* (ether), words like *soham* (He am I), *sūnya* (void), *rau* (the sun), *shiv* (Siva), *ānand* (bliss), *om*, *rāza honz* (King of swans). He handles the vocabulary and the related concepts so well that the poems acquire a distinctive Hindu tone. Of such poems the one that specially comes to my mind is titled 'Pad' (the first of the sequence). The interfusion of two culture is indeed very conspicuous in the Sufi poet.

Several lyrics of Shamas Faqir centre

round the theme of the mystic's quest for the primal cause of this universe. As an illustration, the lyric titled '*Āgur Kami Manz Drav*' repeatedly poses the question, 'what is the fountainhead of the stream?', which serves as its refrain. Here is my translation of some significant lines of the poem (attempted to convey the essential meaning):

Day and night does *Pavan* flow
Through the four *Bhavans* non-stop;
Whence did it come
And whither did it go?
It was even (all of one hue),
Whence did the stream come forth?

.....

He who owns the sea
Is the Lord of water,
The river issued from the drop;
To get to the meaning,
Sacrifice yourself first;

.....

O Shamas, to attain *gnosis*,
Throw open your heart's door;
Sun-like, roam the sky through
(To fathom the Secret);
What is the fountain-head?⁷

We can see that the poem poses vital and thought-provoking questions regarding the First Cause. It instructs the seeker to pursue the spiritual journey inwardly to realize the Self. This would naturally call for annihilation of the little self. The answer to the imponderable question regarding the source of the Cosmos is provided through the intertwined images of the 'drop' and the 'river'. They parallel the images of the *bindu* and the *sinu* given in Hindu mystical literature, conveying what Swami Ram Tirtha does equally aptly through the phrase 'Infinite in the Finite'. In the concluding

lines, that lay stress on cleansing the heart as a means to inward transformation, the tone of the poem changes as the poet addresses his own self. Without sounding the didactic, the changed tone stimulates self-introspection in the reader/listener.

The Persian Sufi poets have often used the word *rindā* in their lyrics. It refers to the true lover, a liberated soul (not *tied* to this or that school). With its rich associations, it has been absorbed into Kashmiri mystical poetry and has by now got into common usage among the Kashmiris. It occurs frequently in Shamas Faqir's verse too. One poem titled '*Rindā Sara Ho Sapdi Kunu Ye*' is specifically addressed to the *rindā*. This is how the poet instructs the aspiring gnostic:

O *rindā*, in order to realize the One,
Learn to die while still alive.

Emphasis is laid in the poem on self-conquest as being the stepping stone to advancement in spirituality. Whether we call the aspirant a yogi or an *ārif*, his *sādhana* has to consist in 'cleansing of the doors of perception', which involves a disciplining of the mind and the senses. He has to be discriminative and mentally alert throughout. Shamas Faqir is explicit about this quality required of the true aspirant:

Seemingly blind, look keenly for
What you seek, O *rindā*!
Sifting the pure grain
From the impure,
Winnowing the grains a hundred times
Will reveal the Precious One to you.

The poet draws our attention to the strenuousness and pains involved in the spiritual effort, in these lines:

Break the stones at the dead of night,
To take away the Gem guarded
by the cobra;

7. Onwards also, I have quoted a few more passages from Shamas Faqir's verse (rendered into English by me for illustrative support).

Feed the burning lamp
with your blood,
Eat up your own flesh;
Thus will you, O *rindā*, realize the One.

Special stress is laid in the closing lines on belief and divine grace:

Believe before you verify,
That's Shamas Faqir's gospel;
When you get the 'Word'
As a God-sent gift,
O *rindā*, you'll realize the One.

In one particular poem titled '*Walo Māshoka Deedār Hāv*', the poet employs 'dark imagery' throughout, from the beginning to the end, and mentions 'black light' specifically in these lines:

The Elixir of life is hidden in the dark,
The light divine is dark, too;
Light itself is grounded in darkness,
Pray, meet me Beloved!

This poem reminds us of the images of 'darkness' that are so recurrent in St. John of the Cross, especially in his poem titled 'Dark Night of the Soul'. There is a close parallel between the Christian concept of 'divine dark' and what Shamas Faqir conveys through his images. Similarly, the names of Hindu divinities such as Krishna, Shyāmā, Kālarātri, Megashyāma, suggest 'the night of the great release into the oneness of Self',⁸ which is dark only to the senses, not to the spirit.

The 'human form divine', in its feminine aspect, is celebrated conspicuously in the poetry of Persian Sufis. Parallel motifs and images are seen to occur in both Hindu and Christian mysticism. The form func-

tions as a *wisdom figure*, which is, in fact, a recurrent image in literature. It is also identifiable as the 'theophanic figure through whom the manifestation of God takes place'.⁹

Shamas Faqir too follows this Sufistic tradition as a poet. In several poems, he introduces a lady as embodying 'Beauty' and 'Truth', but the images of woman that he employs do not suggest the flesh. In one such poem titled 'Rov', the feminine form, described as '*ashqa sonḍar*', recalls the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Her physical graces are rendered in fine detail—red lips, charming teeth, incomparable mouth (*dahān*), seductive locks (resembling coiled snakes) and the like. All these images are loaded with mystical significance in the Sufi tradition.

Similarly, the names of Hindu divinities such as 'Krishna', Shyāmā, Kālarātri, Megashyāma' suggest 'the night of the great release into the oneness of Self', which is dark only to the senses, not to the spirit.

Another such poem of deep import, addressed throughout to a woman hailed as the 'esteemed lady', is titled '*Manareniye Pān Badlav*'. It makes an elaborate use of the symbolism that we especially meet with in Christian mystical writings—depicting the soul as the spouse of God. In the poem under discussion, the 'honoured lady' is cautioned not to be remiss in 'throwing the precious stone away'. She is advised to undergo 'alchemical' transformation to deserve the rare gift and the elevation that she seeks as

(Continued on page 312)

8. Jankinath Kaul 'Kamal', tr. & annotator, *Indrakshi Stotram* (Srinagar, Kashmir: Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, 1995), p. 38.

9. E.B. Greenwood, 'Poetry and Paradise: A Study in Thematics', *Essays in Criticism*, 17 (1967), p. 19.

The Life of Devi Roop Bhavani^{*}

MS. APARNA DAR

This is an account of the life of Devī Roop Bhavānī (a translation into English of her Vākhs, poetic verses, will appear in the following issues of the PB). She was born in Srinagar on Jyaiṣṭha Paurṇamāsī (full moon), AD 1621, and lived her entire life in the valley of Kashmir. She was a fully illumined soul who because of her divine nature was said to have been born of the elements of Divine Mother Durgā, or Shārikā as She is known in Kashmir. The author of the article is a lecturer at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

In the early seventeenth century, a Kashmiri Pundit named Madhav Ju Dar lived in Srinagar. Madhav Ju was of a deeply religious and philosophical temperament, and his daily life was conducted in an impeccably religious spirit. He worshipped the Supreme Being (Īshwara) in the form of the Divine Mother Shārikā (Durgā).

In Srinagar, there is a hill known as Hara Parvat or Shārikā Parvat where the Goddess Shārikā is worshipped since ancient times. Legend relates that, long ago, some demons troubled the local people, who prayed to the Goddess Durgā for protection. She took the form of a Shārikā (Maina) bird and dropped a large chunk of earth on the entrance to the cave of the demons to seal them inside the hill. She then took Her abode on the hill to ensure that they did not escape. This gave the name Sharika Parvat to the hill. The Goddess is represented there by the *Sri Chakra* (a regular geometrical mystical pattern) in sandy rock, which is anointed with red lead

(*sindūr*). The deity is also called Chakreshwari. Regular worship has been offered at this shrine for centuries.

To this shrine of the Divine Mother Sharika, Madhav Ju came every day to worship in the auspicious hour of *Brāhma Muhūrta* (pre-dawn). He would chant Her Holy Name, with his face glowing with devotion and his entire being absorbed in Her worship. For hours he would be so transported, the fire of devotion lighting up his entire being with divine radiance. Thus did this devotee of the Divine Mother pass his days.

It is said that on the first day of the *Navarātri* (the nine days dedicated to the worship of the Divine Mother Durga) in the month of *Ashwin*, in the year 1620, Madhav Ju arrived for worship at midnight, to uninterruptedly worship on this most auspicious of occasions.

He commenced his worship and, with all reverence and attentive detail, he glorified the Supreme Goddess, his heart filled with adoration. When his worship was complete, the Divine Mother is said to have appeared before him in the form of a radiant girl child.

On seeing this divine child, Madhav was so filled with intense joy and bliss that he lost all consciousness of his external surroundings, and tears of joy and devotion flowed from his eyes. He understood that

* The author writes: 'The *Vākhs* of Devī Roop Bhavānī and her life history were obtained from the books, *Sri Roop Bhavānī Rahasya Upadesha*, published in Hindi by Sri Alakh Sahiba Trust, Srinagar, Kashmir, in 1977, and *Bhavānī Nāma Sahasra Stutih*, by Sri Janki Nath Kaul ('Kamal'), Ramakrishna Ashrama, Srinagar.'

the Mother of the Universe, Mahāmāyā, was Herself in front of him in the form of this child.

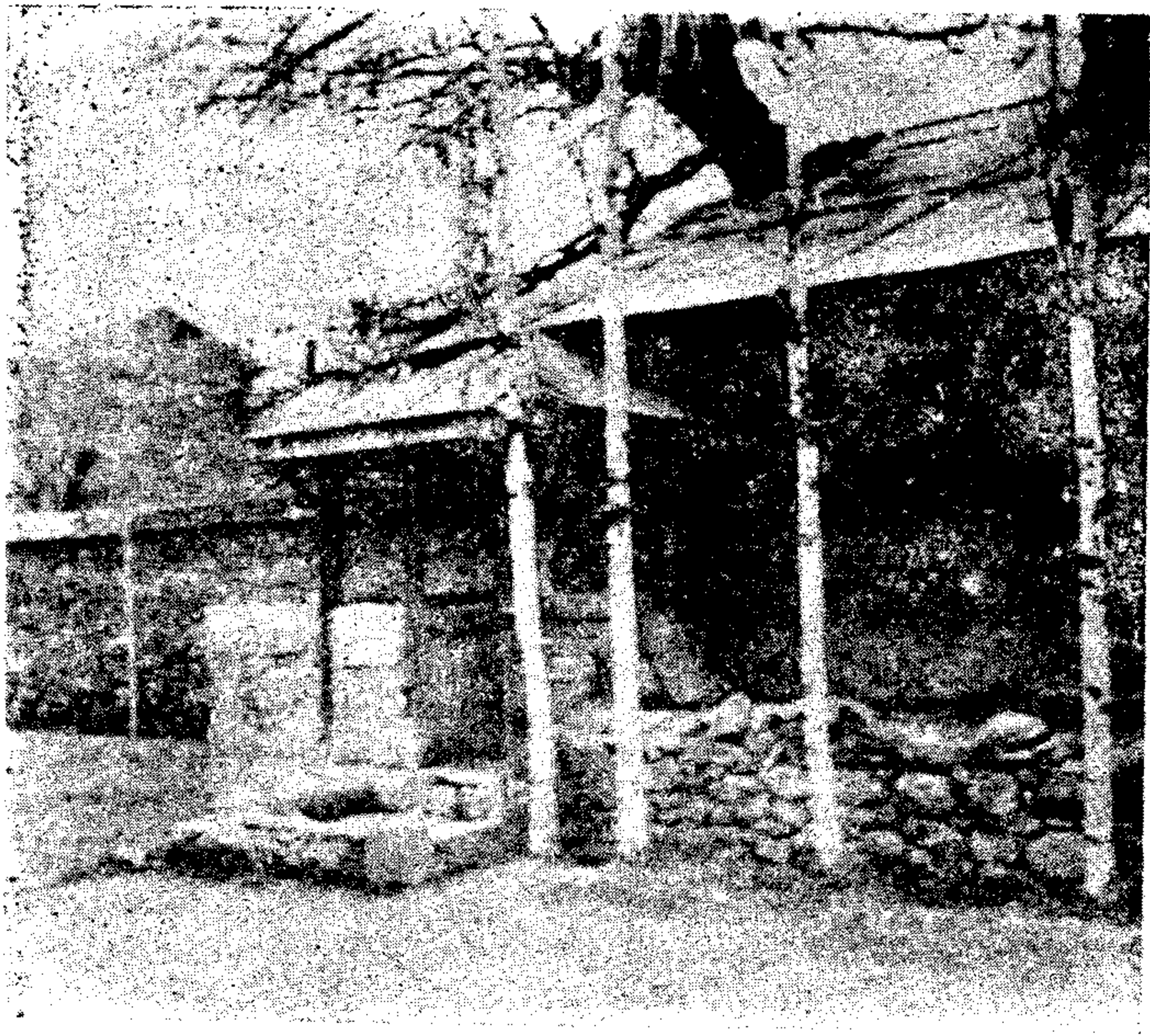
Thereupon he worshipped the girl, placing flowers at Her feet and incense before Her. With fatherly love he offered Her sweets. The Mother was pleased with the simplicity, sincerity, and love, of Her devotee, and granted him a boon. Madhav requested Mother, 'Since you have appeared before me in the form of a child, take birth in my house as my daughter.' The Divine Mother granted the boon and vanished. So goes the legend of the birth of Roop Bhavani.

In the following year 1621, in the month of *Jyeshtha*, on the *Poornimā Tithi* (full moon), in the early morning a daughter was born to Madhav Ju's wife. Ju named his daughter Alakshyeshvari, which means one who is imperceptible and indescribable; it refers to the Goddess in the formless non-dual

aspect.

In her father's house, Alakshyeshvari's years of childhood were passed in the company of devotees. Ju was held in high esteem, and spiritual seekers came from far-away provinces to meet him. Alakshyeshvari's spirituality blossomed early in these favourable conditions. As she grew older, the spiritual tendencies within her became increasingly manifest. Her father, Madhav, himself became her guru and gave her spiritual initiation. Nevertheless, in accordance with the prevailing customs of the time, her father arranged her marriage to a young man of the nearby Sapru family.

However, Alakshyeshvari's married life was unhappy. Her husband, Hiranand Sapru, totally lacked all understanding of Alakshyeshvari's spiritual nature; and her mother-in-law, Sop Kunj, had a cruel disposition. Alakshyeshvari's life in this house was difficult and joyless. Her mother-in-law



The birth-place of Devi Roop Bhavani in Navakdal, Srinagar

was always finding fault with her. Once she accused Alakshyeshvari of going out at midnight, and made Hiranand suspicious of his wife's fidelity.

The truth was that at midnight Alakshyeshvari would go to perform her *sādhana* (spiritual practice) at the shrine of Mother Sharika on Hara Parvat. One day Hiranand followed her to see where she went at night. Alakshyeshvari knew this. When she had nearly reached the shrine she turned around and asked Hiranand to join her. However, as he was steeped in ignorance, he is said to have beheld a vast expanse of water, impossible to cross, between himself and her and, disheartened, he was forced to return home.

Yet another incident is related of her life in her in-laws home. One day, on the occasion of some festival, Madhav sent his daughter a pot of rice pudding (*kheer*). Alakshyeshvari's mother-in-law on seeing the *kheer* spoke sarcastically, 'What will I do with this small pot of *kheer*? I have so many relatives; this is hardly sufficient for them.' Alakshyeshvari replied, 'Please give this *kheer* to as many persons as you like, but don't look inside the pot.' Sop Kunj began to ladle out the *kheer* and gave it to everyone she knew. But the supply of *kheer* seemed endless! Finally, furious with anger, Sop Kunj looked inside the pot to find just a few grains sticking to its sides.

The next day at dawn, Alakshyeshvari cleaned the pot, and placed it in the flowing current of the Vitasta river, speaking thus, 'My father is doing his morning prayers (*Sandhyā*) at the Diddmar Ghat. Go and stop there.' The pot floated down the Vitasta river and stopped exactly where Ju was doing his *Sandhyā*. Madhav picked up the pot and took it home.

Even after seeing such miraculous incidents, not just once, but many times, Sop Kunj stubbornly refused to change her ways towards Alakshyeshvari. Hiranand also remained foolish and ignorant. Finally,

when living there became unbearable, Alakshyeshvari left her husband's house never to return. It is said that this Sapru family's fortunes rapidly declined thereafter.

Alakshyeshvari renounced her father's home as well, and decided to seek the eternal abode of the Supreme Being. She wanted to become absorbed in *sādhana*. Seeking a solitary retreat, she selected a location to the north-east of Srinagar, known by its ancient name Jyēṣṭha Rudra. Here she did intense *tapasyā* (austerities) for twelve and a half years, and began to glow with the fire of spirituality. At this point, people, attracted by her spiritual radiance, began to come to her in such large numbers that she decided to leave the place for a more solitary retreat.

She moved to a village Mani Gaon, in north Kashmir, on the banks of the Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas. On festival days many people would gather at Mani Gaon for a dip in the sacred waters. In these beautiful surroundings Alakshyeshvari chose to do her *sadhana*. On a forested hill-top, far from the village, she made a hermitage for herself. For a long time she remained in solitude, deep in spiritual practices.

It is said that none of the villagers at Mani Gaon knew of Alakshyeshvari's existence, until a certain miraculous incident revealed her presence to them. A cowherd boy used to take his cows to graze at a place which, unknown to him, was close to where Alakshyeshvari was absorbed in meditation. The boy noticed that a beautiful white cow left the herd every day at noon, and later returned on her own accord. One day he decided to follow the cow to see where she went.

Following the cow, he reached a clearing in the forest. There he saw a beautiful woman dressed in ochre robes seated in meditation, her long hair flowing loosely, her face ashine with a heavenly lustre, and her eyes filled with a divine light. The cow,

as though under a spell, stopped before the radiant ascetic. The ascetic woman got up and lovingly caressed the cow. The cow of her own accord poured its milk into the ascetic's bowl until it was full!

On seeing this wonderful vision the cowherd boy lost consciousness. When he returned to his senses, he traced his way back to his herd. In the evening, when he milked the white cow he found to his astonishment that she gave even more milk than usual.

The cowherd confided his experiences to Lal Chandra, the village head. Lal was filled with reverence and devotion. He visited Alakshyeshvari, and then came daily to serve her in whichever way he could. By this time she had completed another twelve and a half years of spiritual practice in that hermitage.

We will from here refer to her as Bhavānī (the Goddess as the power originating the world) or as Bhagavatī (the Goddess with the six attributes of supremacy, righteousness, fame, prosperity, wisdom, and discrimination). This is in keeping with the common belief in Kashmir that Alakshyeshvari was an incarnation of the Goddess Durga.

Lal Chandra told the villagers of Bhavani and the miraculous happenings attributed to her. But when she began to receive a great deal of public attention, she left the village, preferring to continue her spiritual practices in solitude. She went to dwell in a hut on the bank of the Shahkol river. Even there she attracted devotees.

Once, a spiritual seeker fascinated by her aura of spirituality asked her, 'What is your name?' Bhavani replied, 'My name is Roopa (one who has realized her own True Self).' The seeker further question her, 'Why do you wear this ochre dress?' Bhagavati replied, 'This ochre represents the state of being in which the individual soul has taken the colour of the Supreme Being.'

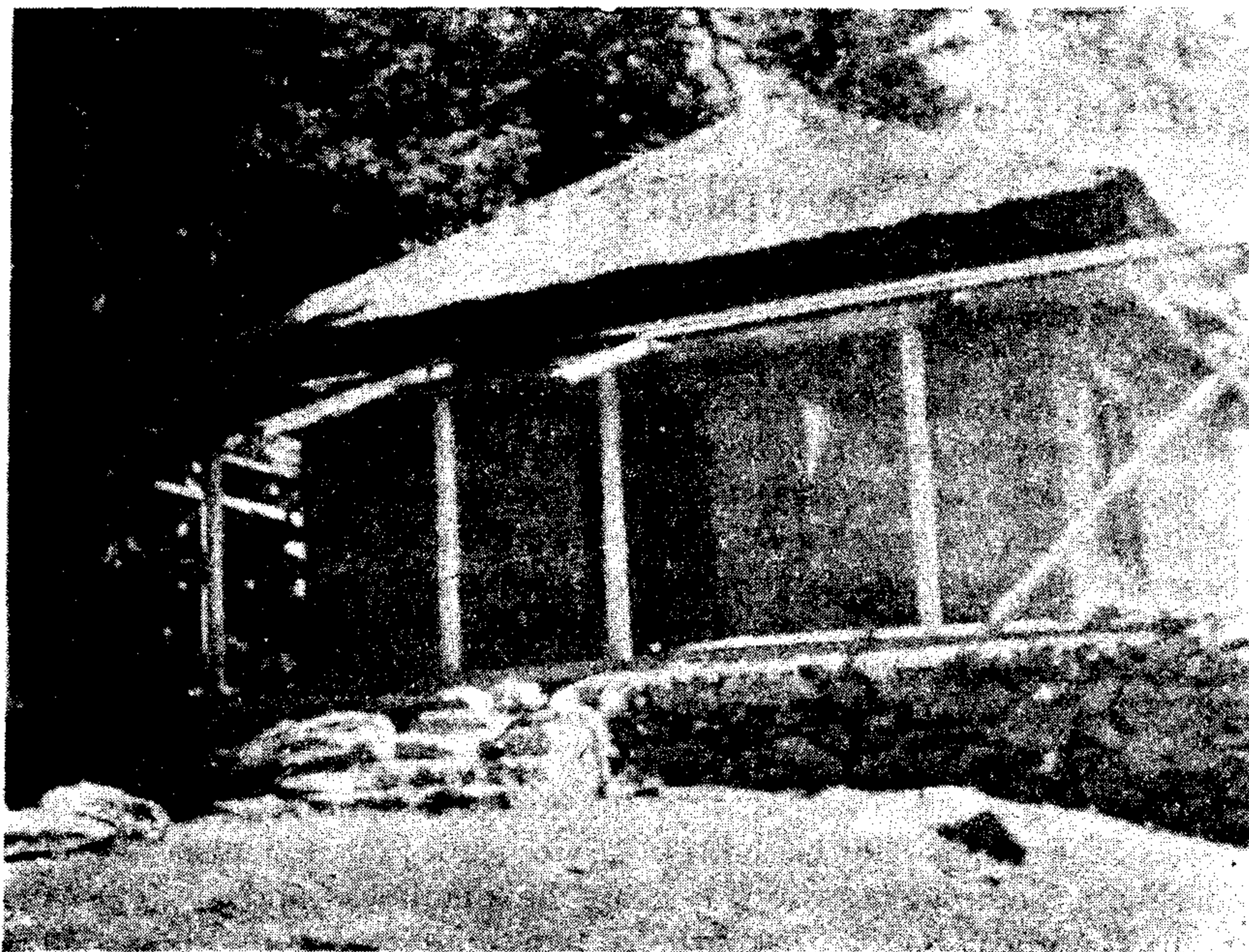
Bhavani lived for many years on the

banks of the Shahkol, absorbed in meditation. Finally, when large numbers of devotees again began to flock around her, she once more moved away to a quieter spot, in the village of Vaskora. Legend says that the Nāga, (snake) Vāsuki, did his *tapasyā* in Vaskora to attain the Grace of Shiva. When his *sadhana* bore fruit, he asked Lord Shiva for a boon, 'May I always adorn you as a necklace.' Bhagavati greatly liked this spot and began to dwell there.

Bhavani's grace now began to shower on her numerous devotees. Many miracles are attributed to her. There was a young boy, blind from birth, who served her with great devotion. Bhavani's compassionate heart was moved by his sad condition. She gave him a stick and asked him to dig the earth with it. He immediately obeyed her. Many devotees gathered nearby, watching. Soon water began to appear from the hole that was dug. Bhavani said to the young boy, 'Wash your eyes with the water that has come forth.' As the boy did so, his sight was restored, and the crowd of devotees were amazed.

Bhavani had a brother, Lal Ju, who was very devoted to her and took her as his guru. Lal's son, Bal, began to stay with her in her service. Once, Lal requested Bhavani to educate his illiterate son. Bhavani gave the boy a pen and some paper and ordered him to write. Thereupon, miraculously, the boy began to write fluently like a highly educated person. The devotees were overwhelmed by this transformation.

In Vaskora, Bhavani began to give spiritual instruction to Bal Ju Dar and Sadanand Muttoo in the form of poetical verses, called Vākhs. One hundred and forty-five of her Vākhs have been transmitted to us. After twelve and a half years (periods of this length seem to recur in Bhavani's life) had elapsed in Vaskora, Bhavani returned to Srinagar on the entreaties of her numerous devotees, and began to live in Saphakadal.



The room in the village of Lar in which she performed her sadhana

Many years had elapsed, and Bhavani now yearned to be released from her earthly body. On the *Saptami Tithi*, in the month of *Māgha*, in the year 1721, Bhavani's soul took flight forever. The legend relates how her devotees, filled with grief, carried her body towards the cremation ground. On the way they met the village head who, on seeing the funeral procession, asked whom they were carrying. On hearing that it was Roop Bhavani he was very startled, for he had just seen Bhavani walking down the road by which he came! The devotees looked inside the coffin and found nothing there but some

alak (locks of hair) and some flowers. The *alak* are even today worshipped with great reverence.

Although she is not with us now, Roop Bhavani's *Vakhs* are so vibrant with her presence that on reading them one feels that she is very near, giving knowledge to her children with powerful words of renunciation, and dispelling ignorance with the weapon of Eternal Truth. May she guide us on the true path of knowledge, towards the Divine Light. □

Ye are not bound! the Soul of Things is sweet,
The Heart of Being is celestial rest;
Stronger than woe is will: that which was Good
Doth pass to Better—Best.

—*The Light of Asia*

Plague in Calcutta (1899) and Sister Nivedita: An Exemplary Approach

DRS. MAMATA RAY AND ANIL BARAN RAY

'What Sister Nivedita did by way of nursing the plague victims in the dark and squalid dwellings of the poor in the Baghbazar area of Calcutta, and attacking the root causes of the epidemic is exemplary, and could be an eye-opener to us all even today. Hers was an exemplary approach which showed at once how she put into practice Swami Vivekananda's doctrine of selfless service to the poor and the miserable and how through such service to the people of the country she lived by what she called her religion of nationality'—is how the authors introduce this stirring article. They teach Political Science at Visva-Bharati University and Burdwan University, W.B., respectively.

I

As early as 22 February 1899, Nivedita noted laconically in a letter the governmental declaration of plague in Baghbazar (part of Calcutta): '...somewhere about here. Next door to the Bose's. Numbers of rats have died.' The scourge soon assumed the shape of an epidemic and was rife in Nivedita's neighbourhood, prompting her to note in another letter (23 March) that 'plague is raging here.'¹ The crisis presented a test for Nivedita. Would she spend her time in prayer and meditation, brooding over the theoretical significance of Kali worship? Or would she put into practice the 'religion of Nationality'² she learnt from her Master—

the goal of attaining spirituality by selfless service of the poor and miserable³ and rousing the 'manliness' and social power of the Indian people (as Swami Vivekananda used to urge) by awakening their divine and national consciousness? She had not the least doubt or hesitation as to the course she would choose. The directions of her Guru left her in no uncertainty about it in a situation like this:

our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. This is the only god that is awake, our own race—"everywhere His hands, everywhere His feet, everywhere His ears, He covers everything.'" *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3, pp. 300-01.

1. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 62, 89; hereafter *Letters*. Sister Nivedita was living and running her school at 17 Bosepara Lane in Baghbazar.

2. Nivedita asserted, in the context of the then India: 'Nationality is the religion of the present period.' See *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1975), vol. 5, p. 134; hereafter C.W.N.

This concept is reflective of Swami Vivekananda's urging that 'for the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this,

3. Swamiji introduced the phrase, '*Daridra devo bhava*', to motivate one and all to serve the poor and the miserable as God. 'Where should you go to seek for God—are not the poor, miserable, the weak Gods? Why not worship them first?' said Swamiji.

See also: Swami Prabhananda, 'Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Doctrine of Service in Swami Vivekananda: *A Hundred Years Since Chicago: A Commemorative Volume* (Belur Math, Howrah: Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, 1994), pp. 394-417.

Never complain, he had said, of not having enough time for prayer and meditation. Your mission and your achievement lie in your work. That is the goal to which I am leading you. You must unite within yourself the practical spirit and culture of the perfect citizen, with love of poverty, purity, and complete abandonment of self. These are the conditions under which your faith will blossom. Reveal your unlimited power after you yourself have completely renounced it. Until you are capable of this, mortify yourself; in order to find strength. A stern tapasya [austerity] will discipline you! But make haste! Follow me. March with me. My mission is not...anything but simply to bring manhood to these people.⁴

With reference to the bubonic plague ravaging Baghbazar, Swamiji said to Nivedita: 'We must save the district...It is for you to do this.'⁵ Swamiji continued:

We want work—activity—we're going to have a lecture this week—you'll give it and I'll take the chair—all the Calcutta students—they shall come out and clean the city—all of it—with their own hands—I want them to have 'death fever'—do you know what that is? I have been talking to my own boys all yesterday and they are just like leashed hounds.⁶

'I'll help you Swamiji', pledged Nivedita to Swamiji. And pledged she was, to helping Swami Vivekananda bring manhood to his people and fight the scourge that had befallen Baghbazar. The plague was taking its toll of one hundred people every

day. The number of death-fires on the Ganges' banks was pitiful indeed. There was panic throughout the city. Amidst all this, true to the words she gave her Guru, Nivedita did everything within her power to rise to the situation created by the plague. As her biographer notes:

Nivedita fought an implacable war. She went through the stricken localities, making inquiries, prepared lists of vacant beds; opened a provisional dispensary in a wooden shed; organized groups of voluntary workers under the direction of Swami Sadananda. Her campaign was pursued so vigorously that the Government Health Officer, with his inspectors, came to see her.⁷

Another biographer of Nivedita gives the following record of her plague work:

She went on lecturing, writing letters to the papers, appealing for funds, rolling up her sleeves and supervising the worker boys, striding into the houses where she was asked for help.⁸

A third biographer tells us how Nivedita inspected and instructed the plague work:

Nivedita inspected all the work done and gave instructions. One day, she started cleaning the lanes herself when there was a shortage of volunteers. The boys of the neighbourhood felt ashamed and ran to help her, promising to keep the lanes clean thenceforth.⁹

That Nivedita did all this, especially the

4. Quoted in Lizelle Reymond, *The Dedicated* (Madras: Samata Books, 1985), p. 153.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

6. *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 108.

7. Reymond, p. 155.

8. Barbara Foxe, *Long Journey Home* (London: Rider and Co., 1975), p. 78.

9. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1961), p. 76.

nursing of the sick, without giving a thought at all to her own condition, is a fact that we come to know from the account of Dr. Radha Govinda Kar, the government doctor who was an eye-witness to Sister Nivedita's work:

During this calamity, the compassionate figure of sister Nivedita was seen in every slum of the Baghbazar. She helped *others* with money *without giving a thought to her own condition*. At one time when her own diet consisted only of milk and fruits, she gave up milk to meet the medical expenses of a patient.

...That morning I had been to see a plague-stricken patient in a slum in Baghbazar. Sister Nivedita had come to enquire about the arrangements made for the patient and to take upon herself the task of nursing him. When I went to visit the patient again in the afternoon I saw sister Nivedita sitting with the child in her lap in the damp and weather-beaten hut in that unhealthy locality.

...She remained engaged in nursing

for its vividness as for its poignancy:

My first case of plague. A few minutes later we entered the cottage where the patient lay. It was an ordinary mud hut...people were Dhobies....Utterly lethargic he [the patient] lay there, poor child, a bright promising boy of twelve or fourteen. He had been ill since the previous evening; it was now nine o'clock in the morning; the bubo was slightly developed...

It was so little that could be done. Food, medicine, and a bath—all these could be given. Yes, and the head could be shaved, ice applied, and a fan kept going; but when all was said and done, one was sitting there to watch a human being die—to watch, without hope of saving.¹¹

Referring to the same case, Nivedita writes in a letter to her friend:

On Tuesday I nursed a case from 10 o'clock. He died at evening. It was not

...She remained engaged in nursing the child in that hut, having abandoned her own house. When the hut was to be disinfected she took a small ladder and began whitewashing the walls herself. Her nursing never slackened even when death was a certainty.

the child in that hut, having abandoned her own house. When the hut was to be disinfected she took a small ladder and began whitewashing the walls herself. Her nursing never slackened even when death was a certainty. After two days, the child lay in eternal sleep in the affectionate lap of the merciful lady.¹⁰

The account that Nivedita herself gives of the plague-nursing is moving, as much

repulsive in any way. Only a high fever with occasional delirium—a slight swelling—and a collapse of the heart from which he died most peacefully...

I stole some of the love that he meant that last day for his mother. In delirium once he seized my hand and carried his own to his lips. He was a boy of 12 or 14. And often he looked at me and smiled—and at the end—when he began in a paroxysm of delirium to say 'Haribol' I took it up and stood repeating it and he

10. *Aryavarta* (B.S. 1318 Agrahayana), quoted by Barbara Foxe, pp. 75–6.

11. C.W.N., 'The Plague', vol. 2, p. 332.

with a look of relief and soothing, lay quietly back and gradually died—so that those words were the last in the poor child's consciousness.¹²

II

Tremendously impressed though Swami Vivekananda was with the courage and selfless service of Nivedita in nursing the plague victims, he felt that she was 'attempting too much'.¹³ Worried now about the physical well-being of Nivedita, he held that her energy should be better spent in attacking the root cause of the disease. The conditions which produced the plague were two-fold: 1) insanitation, and 2) ignorance, and Swamiji asked Nivedita to direct her efforts towards the removal of both these evils, that is, to tackle the disease at its source. As Nivedita herself reports:

I am to give up all thought of plague-nursing and throw my heart and soul into the work of sanitation we now have in hand. This is an infinitely higher proof of self-sacrifice on my part than the delightful experiment of risking plague would be.¹⁴

At Swamiji's instance, a plague committee was formed by the Ramakrishna Mission. As Secretary, Nivedita was in overall command of the committee. Swami Sadananda, the monk functioning as the attendant of Nivedita at her Bosepara Lane residence, was made the supervisor of the plague work, while Swamis Shivananda, Nityananda and Atmananda were to function as members of the committee. With the committee deciding that 'our plan of cleaning on a large scale would be the only

remedy'¹⁵, Nivedita decided to raise the number of this 'scavenger brigade' headed by Swami Sadananda, nicknamed the 'Scavenger Swami'.¹⁶ In order to meet the increasing expenses of the cleansing operation, Nivedita resolved to appeal through

Nivedita decided to raise the number of this 'scavenger brigade' headed by Swami Sadananda, nicknamed the 'Scavenger Swami'.

English newspapers¹⁷ for plague relief, hoping to start a Sanitation Fund for the purpose. In her *appeal*, she suggested ways in which 'we can all be helpful in the first place, to destroy the *conditions*, which have made the epidemic not only possible, but also powerful.'¹⁸

The first necessity was the dissemination of exact and scrupulous notions of cleanliness—the need of detailed cleansing of the house with water, mixed with cheaper and yet invaluable disinfectants such as perchloride of mercury. The second necessity was to bring the disinfectants within the reach of the people. The first (i.e. explaining

16. Nivedita writes in her *Letters*: 'Sadananda goes by the name of "scavenger Swami." He is in unending enthusiasm over bad drains—nothing is *bad* enough to please us now!'—*ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

'In the early morning Sadananda like a hero superintends his gang of scavengers. These lanes and bustees are a different place now—thanks to him.'—*ibid.*, p. 99.

Nivedita jokingly mentions that Sadananda referred to all this cleansing work as 'my work'. 'He treats me as his employer and speaks of his fear of my anger should I find the work neglected.'—*ibid.*, p. 101.

17. The *Indian Mirror* carried her appeal on 28 March 1899.

18. C.W.N., vol. 5, p. 212.

12. *Letters*, letter dated 23 March 1899, to Miss Josephine MacLeod, vol. 1, p. 89.

13. *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 111.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 101.

the laws of sanitation to people) will be useless without the second. To this end, Nivedita suggested that 'gentlemen might provide themselves with quantities of perchloride of mercury for distribution *gratis* to their poorer neighbours.'¹⁹ The third necessity was the subscription and collection of funds: 'More funds are absolutely necessary, and as I have no hope of raising them here I venture to appeal to European Calcutta for help.'²⁰ On behalf of the native have-nots of Calcutta and in the name of simple human pity and Christian charity, Nivedita made a passionate appeal to the European-'haves' of Calcutta:

Will those who can daily feast their sense of sight and smell on the fresh air and beautiful flowers of private gardens and the Maidan, those to whom cleanliness of roads and surroundings is no luxury but a first need, will they do what they can towards such ends for those who can not hope to enjoy even the least of them otherwise?²¹

III

It should be emphatically pointed out that Nivedita's whole approach in this campaign against plague was towards raising the consciousness and social power of the people themselves. The effort was, for the people, and it must come from the people themselves, she insisted.²² She wanted to help the people, but there was *no sense* of *patronage* in her helping. She did not want to make *any fuss* whatsoever about her campaign. When Mr. Bright, Chairman of the Government-appointed plague committee and one of the highest officials, came by order of the Government to see the sanitary work of Nivedita and her team, he was as-

tounded to see the magnificence of the work done, and regretted not having been told about the work before. Nivedita replied that 'we did not know he would care—and *that* was not our business anyway. *We wanted to help the people, not to make a fuss*'²³ (Emphasis added).

Nivedita was more than successful in creating a sense of cooperation and assistance among the people. 'We have had (to quote her) 235 rupees subscribed for sanitation. It seems a great success.'²⁴ Working with disinterested motives provided the key to Nivedita's success with the people. As she herself observes:

The people—once assured that we are private persons working from disinterested motives—begged our helping with interior cleansing, and have listened gladly to our advice about sanitation and disinfectants. They have allowed and even invited us to enter their houses, and have not been afraid to show us their terrible poverty. There are something like a couple of miles of drain and lane, three days ago unutterably filthy, where today an Englishwoman can walk without annoyance.²⁵

Without raising people's power, without drawing upon their responses and cooperation, Nivedita could not have made possible this apparently impossible task. No amount of mercenary impulse could have brought about this wonder. It is the work without selfish motive, the *niṣkāma karma* done with utter sincerity and whole-heartedness that made all the difference. As Nivedita says, 'My assistants are monks who have become scavengers. They work eighteen hours a day, and offer their work

19. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–6.

22. Reymond, p. 155.

23. *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 107.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

25. C.W.N., vol. 5, p. 215.

to God.²⁶

In a letter dated 19 April 1899, addressed to Mrs. Ole Bull, Nivedita gives a record of the plague work, which is important in itself and is worth quoting for the chronology that it provides.²⁷

On Good Friday—March 31st

Sadananda started bustee [Bosepara bustee] cleaning with a gang of 7 scavengers; Swami [Vivekananda] had given us 100 rupees.

Thursday—April 6th

My letter appeared in *Statesman* and *Englishman*—Dr. Nield Cook [the Health Officer for Calcutta] came to inspect, and funds began to come in.

Monday—April 10th

We had now collected 235 rupees extra, and added 5 scavengers and one monk to our staff.

Sunday—April 9th and Saturday—15th

The work was inspected for us in a friendly way by Dr. Mahoney, Government Plague Officer for the District.

Monday—17th

It was visited by the Chairman of Committee—by order of high Government officials—who called it 'model'—and told me to let *him* know when my funds ran out. Sadananda says that such an attitude from these authorities is very high praise.

And now on Saturday 22nd Swami has arranged that I am to lecture to Calcutta students about it—WITH HIM IN THE CHAIR!!!

Presiding over Nivedita's lecture to Calcutta students delivered at the Classic

Theatre in Beadon Street on the 22nd April 1899, Swami Vivekananda pointed out that the English people often took pleasure in holding the Bengalis to be lethargic, and that the recent outbreak of plague in Calcutta provided an opportunity to Bengalis to dissipate such aspersions by coming up with vigorous practical action with regard to the plague and thus 'prove themselves to be men'.²⁸

Taking the cue from Swamiji, Nivedita observed that there were indeed people with sneering attitudes who kept saying that 'you can't clean natives.'²⁹ She pointed out emphatically that, since she became involved in bustee cleansing operations her experience was totally different; in every case she found the people eager and longing for decency. If there was still some habit of throwing refuse on the roads, that habit was due to the *zenana-system* which kept women confined to the inner recess of their homes and thus prevented them from realizing the state of their surroundings, or the bearing of private cleanliness on the public weal.

The way to people's heart lay not through casting aspersions, as some Englishmen were used to doing, but through (to quote Nivedita) 'kind words and patient explanations.'³⁰ The so-called bamboo 'sanitary structures' and the tanks receiving sewage and other contaminations from the bustees had indeed constituted the permanent nuisances of the town. But it was too much to expect the poor and starved owners of huts of the bustees to set them right. Whatever the costs involved in putting them right, it was the duty of the community to get it done.

Having thus empathized with the poor

26. Reymond, p. 155.

27. *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 120. Nivedita published a similar record of the plague work in *Prabuddha Bharata*, May 1899. See *C.W.N.*, vol. 5, pp. 239–41.

28. *C.W.N.*, vol. 5, p. 217.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

bustee-dwellers of India, Nivedita took up the main theme of her Guru's speech, asking them to prove their *manhood* by making themselves 'strong to grapple with those facts of life in which they see its (life's) degradation.'³¹ Manhood, as her Guru was never tired of pointing out, constituted the essence of religion: 'Why, all that can be said in religion can be counted on a few fingers! It's the *man* that results, that grows out of it.

'We are in the midst of a religious revival. Belief and love are vivid within us, and asceticism or self-sacrifice is calling to the most intense consecration. Belief is not faith. Faith is ours at the moment when we do and dare and renounce.'

Salvation is nothing in itself, it is only a *motive*. Freedom is nothing except a motive. It is the man they form that is everything.'³² Echoing the words of her Guru, Nivedita exhorted:

We are in the midst of a religious revival. Belief and love are vivid within us, and asceticism or self-sacrifice is calling to the most intense consecration. Belief is not faith. Faith is ours at the moment when *we do and dare and renounce*³³ (emphasis added).

Giving her clarion call to the students of Calcutta to make their faith a burning reality in the service of their befallen brethren, Nivedita hammered also on that theme of Indian Unity which, henceforth, became a constant burden of her thought as well as action:

In such matters we all stand or fall

together, and the man who abandons his brother is taken by despair himself. The cause of the poor is the cause of all today—let us assert it by practical action.³⁴

Following her address, a large number of students came forward to enlist themselves as volunteers in the labour of cleansing huts and *bustees*. By recruiting them to the service of the feeble and the outcast and the disinherited children of the Motherland, Nivedita was making them contribute to a new future of India. To quote her:

Surely one of the great secrets of the weakness of India lies in the fact that the motherland has never in the past found means to voice in any special way her love of the feeble and the outcast and the disinherited amongst her children. Let us pray that we, of this new generation may live to see the beginning of a different state of things. We mean to hold on to the priceless traditions of our national past, but we mean to create others too, just as good, to feed our national future!³⁵

Indeed, by giving the students of Calcutta a new conception of civic life in the practice of self-sacrifice for the general welfare, Nivedita gave them a very special apprenticeship to the national cause in which religion became social service and politics became the 'religion of manhood, service and unity'. To quote her:

A sweeper who accomplishes his work through an ideal is ready for an even greater ideal. What will that ideal be? It is for you to find out. By saving Bagh Bazar, we are writing the history of India with life itself; this history has

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.

32. Reymond, p. 194.

33. *Sister Nivedita, Complete Works*, vol. 5, p. 220.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 239–40.

never been written. This is our Ramayana.³⁶

'When she spoke of India,' observes Lizelle Reymond with real insight, 'she said "we". The word came naturally to her lips now.'³⁷

IV

An important inkling into Nivedita's thoughts on 'society and politics' as well can be secured from her plague work, which was basically an exemplification of her ideal of religion. First thing to be noted is that her ideas were action-oriented. That is to say, she believed in realizing by action what she thought to be true and right. Like her Guru, she kept exhorting Indian people to 'awake', to shake off inertia and lethargy and assert themselves by practical action 'in the utmost that we could do'³⁸ in the service of our brethren and the motherland.

Secondly, she believed that though plague took a heavy toll of human lives, the catastrophe had its positive aspects too:

(a) It provided the education of the people by practical example,³⁹ which was the most important means of nation-building. As her Master said and as she believed herself, 'To raise the standards of the masses, we must educate them. It is only thus that we can build a nation.'⁴⁰

(b) It provided an opportunity to inspire people to prove their *manhood* by working manfully against the scourge of plague.

(c) It broke down the barrier of *caste*. With the higher and the lower caste people *working together* to alleviate the sufferings of

their stricken brethren, it helped bring about that *integration* in Indian society which was an urgent necessity for a rejuvenated India. Nivedita hoped that with the

Nivedita hoped that with the 'humanizing' of lower castes and with education provided to them, 'it is not too early to look forward to the day when they shall be received as men in the councils of their nation.'

'humanizing'⁴¹ of lower castes and with education provided to them, 'it is not too early to look forward to the day when they shall be received as men in the councils of their nation.'⁴²

(d) It proved the worthiness of the Indian people for democracy.

These all-important words of Nivedita give us a clue as to what she really hoped for for the Indian people in the plane of politics:

Strange how all things work in together to further the great purpose of an epoch, and even a catastrophe like the present is really to hasten that *supreme function of the English in India, the giving of democracy to the Indian people*⁴³ (emphasis added).

Reading between the lines, one will not fail to discern that Nivedita was already thinking of the departure of the British from the land and was hoping that till they left, they should function only to *hasten* that process of democracy, that democratic take-over of their country by the Indian people themselves, which was their ultimate lot as well as their ultimate right.

36. Reymond, p. 155.

37. *Ibid.*

38. C.W.N., vol. 5, p. 220.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

40. Reymond, p. 154.

41. C.W.N., vol. 2, p. 335.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 335-6.

V

In sum, Nivedita's plague work showed her almost perfect imbibing of that ideal of *niṣkāma karma* for India—action without any expectation for oneself—to which, more than anything else, her Guru had dedicated her. Nivedita had carried on her month-long fight against the plague so zealously that even her life was jeopardized.

*Sacrifice seems greater than prayer.
The joy of death intoxicates the hero.
This is indeed the strength of the hero,
that when he has suffered, he asks only,
in reward, a greater suffering. And indeed
we may ask whether all strength is not
this—no longer to bear pain, but rather
to embrace it?*

Swami Saradananda observed in a letter, written in the aftermath of Nivedita's battle against the plague:

She has grown thinner than before and I think a little over-zealous (at least she was so, when I was away) about working for the plague. There is no necessity of lending us as nurses in plague cases as yet—but the 'dear girl' *did beyond* her life (emphasis added) twice that way. Thank God she has been spared.⁴⁴

'Sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden even unto death—this is the motto,'⁴⁵ said Swami Vivekananda. Nivedita fulfilled every word of that motto in her plague work.

The point to note is that even in the height of her fight when she reached the

nadir of exhaustion, she did not take any leave from her schoolwork. She wrote to her friend confidentially:

It is so hot and we have been rushing about so over plague that *I feel tired out body soul and spirit* (emphasis added) and scarcely know how to write, but I could not lie down for very shame, for the children have begun to troop into school.⁴⁶

Indeed, Nivedita's plague work is the best exemplification of the truth she wrote years later:

Sacrifice seems greater than prayer. The joy of death intoxicates the hero. This is indeed the strength of the hero, that when he has suffered, he asks only, in reward, a greater suffering. And indeed we may ask whether all strength is not this—no longer to bear pain, but rather to embrace it?...when all fear is gone, when at the roar of the battle the flame of joy is lighted in the eyes, when a man runs forward at the call of death, to become one with the Terror, not dreaming of shrinking, then and then alone, have we reached the worship of the heroic ideal. Then and then alone have we become worthy to be the offspring of that great Primal Force, that Adya Shakti, whence we came.⁴⁷ □

46. *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 121.

47. *C.W.N.*, vol. 5, p. 89.

44. Swami Saradananda's letter to Miss J. MacLeod, 11 May 1899, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 288.

45. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 5, p. 30.

Indulgence in futile talks and criticisms concerning others only distract the mind and make one forgetful of the Self or Paramatman.

—Sri Ramakrishna

The Mundaka-Upanishad

SWAMI SRIDHARANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue)

SĀNTIPĀṬHA

The *śānti-pāṭha* has a different connotation from that of the *maṅgalācaraṇa* found in subsequent literature. The latter suggests: Let me think of the *Amaṅgala-hāri* so that my work is completed without any disturbance, because there are so many forces operating in the world, so many in my favour, so many against. So let me praise, and seek the guidance and protection of, the Divine source of energy who will help me control those forces. While the *maṅgalācaraṇa* is a clear plea to the Divine for help in completion of our worldly tasks, the *śānti-pāṭha* has a wider connotation.

The purpose of the study of the Upaniṣads is, so to say, to find the experience underlying the *śānti-pāṭha*, and not only to recite it. Apart from peace the Upaniṣads ask for nothing, neither success, nor wealth, nor victory, etc., because it is the peaceful mind alone which can fathom the secret of Nature.

The invocation is to the *devas*, lords, of the universe. The concept of the *devas* in the Upaniṣads should be harmonized with the concept of the universe we have today. To our Upaniṣadic ancestors the *devīs* and *devatas* were not existent in glorified human form, but they were addressed as principles controlling Nature. *Deva* here means 'dyotanavān', from the verb 'dyu dyotane', the effulgent, which implies not only bright light but also that which removes non-understanding. Principles of the universe involved in sound etc. are being addressed.

Each branch of learning follows a certain principle—get hold of it and that whole branch of learning is within your grasp. O Principles of the universe! who guide and conduct the cosmic affairs in a rhythmic manner, we pray to you to help us to use the hearing organ to hear only that which is inspiring, so that we may become worthy and adequately qualified to know the meaning of *Om*.

The prayer to the *devas* is to let us hear only the *bhadra*, the good. *Bhadra* means also grace, that which is ennobling, pleasant, pleasurable. Here it does not mean hearing the pleasurable such as *para-carṇā* and *para-nindā*; that is, it does not mean gossiping about others or taking ill of them, which is pleasing to the ears. But it means hearing by the grace and guidance of the *devas* all the truths in the world that are gracious, uplifting and ennobling. For, only this will make us experience the total suggestion of the symbol *Om*. Worship starts with this prayer to grant us the blessing of hearing the *bhadra*. We are bestowed with five senses, and we beg the *devatas* to help us put those senses to use only to attain to Oneness through the experience of *Om*.

Then follows the prayer—Let our eyes develop the power of seeing everything in the world that ennoble us, inspires us, and makes us graceful. The eyes which now only see the various ordinary forms should be enabled to see the unified essence of these forms. The Divine is to be seen everywhere

by disciplining the organ of vision. The wise say that when the body-consciousness of an individual is absolutely ended, he then experiences inseparableness between himself and *Paramātmān*, the supreme Self, wherever his mind may roam.¹

Performance of *yajña* was an obligatory duty of life. It was more than mere performance of a sacrifice with fire and materials. It symbolized our obligation to parents, teachers, friends, society, wife, children, creatures, natural resources—that is, to all the things that enable us to live and be comfortable. Above all it symbolized our obligation to ourselves—to be the knowers of the Self.

Obligation is *yajña*, and its limit is universal. Seeing and hearing the good while performing the duties of life does not retard or stop the flow of our lives. The mistake is to equate spirituality with otherworldliness. But nowhere in the Upaniṣads is one asked to run away from the realities of life. In fact, the command is to perform, *yajña*, sacrifice, as a daily duty. This was relevant in those days, and it is more so today.

Most psychologists say that the movements of the body are controlled, motivated or guided by the movements of the mind. The Upaniṣad starts the other way around. It says that, till you are physically stable, have got rid of your bodily restlessness, your mind too will jump around like a monkey that has been given a drink and then bitten by a swarm of bees, in the words of Śaṅkara. Thus the purpose here is to control all the limbs of the body and thereby gain control of the mind. For example, in *śavāsana* you lie like a corpse, and then you relax your limbs. Then you also control the

erratic movements of the mind.

So the prayer is to make the body and mind strong and restful. This will let us enjoy a long life for *devahita*, that is, for the good of the many through the effulgent principles of the universe. *Vyaśema* means *enjoy*, not with selfish interests but for *devahitam*; i.e., enjoy by dedicating oneself to the welfare of society under the guidance of the Divine.

The ancient philosophers were greatly introspective, no doubt, but they gave importance to the world in which they lived. There was no question of living in disharmony or in isolation, or for one's own self-interest. All this never came into their mind. So they prayed for a life beneficial to one and all, and also to the principles of the universe: to be able to contribute to them and not to confront or clash with them. They desired to be a part and parcel of the symphony and equilibrium of nature, which they did not want to contradict or disturb. This is how they wanted to enjoy their lives, the purpose of human life being Eternal Bliss, which is available only when one has grown beyond the demands of the body and is no longer bound by it.

*Oṃ! Svasti na indro vṛddhaśravāḥ
Svasti naḥ pūṣā viśvavedāḥ;
Svasti na tārkṣyo ariṣṭanemiḥ
svasti no bṛhaspatir-dadhāt.*

May Indra confer undisturbed prosperity on us. May Vṛddhaśrava (the ancient), Pūṣan, Viśvavedāḥ (sustainer of the world and all-knowing one), Tārkṣya (celestial bird), Ariṣṭanemi (protector from harm), Bṛhaspati (preceptor of *devas*), bestow on us undisturbed sustenance to grow in our endeavour.

1. *Dehābhimāne galite vijñāte paramātmāni;
Yatra yatra mano yāti tatra tatra param padam.*

In the earlier prayer the word *śānti* is used. Here the word is *svasti*. The nearest

meaning of *svasti* is *cain* (in Hindi), absence of disturbance. Further, in this *mantra* Indra, Pūṣan and Bṛhaspati are mentioned, whereas in the first one only principles of nature were talked about. Those principles are now personalized, as though to make communication with them easy. Our forefathers must have thought that the principles by which rain, thunder, and lightning occurred need to be identified and given names, so that prayers could be offered to them. Indra is the mastermind behind all the natural forces which either help or torment the puny human being. He is the master-controller of all the forces of nature that make life enjoyable and free from danger. Vṛddhaśrava means the most ancient, the most powerful and revered. So the prayer was to Indra, the master of the gods, to let us live free from any disturbance, to live in *svasti*.

Pūṣan is the *deva* who manages the affairs of Mother Earth—fertility of the land, flow of the rivers, the atmosphere on which our existence depends, and so on. Let it be auspicious, propitious, so that life is undisturbed. Ariṣṭanemi is the *deva* who protects us from the evil influences which stand between us and the attainment of the Divine, and helps us understand the secret of the Upaniṣads, which is our goal. Bṛhaspati is the god of wisdom, and we pray to him to

prevent us from losing our balance and wisdom, to help us control ourselves, and thus allow us to live undisturbed. In this way the prayer is to let the forces of the universe give us peace and opportunity to manifest fully our creative talents.

The two *śānti-pāṭhas* may be said to be the most ancient ones. They are also most modern, relevant to our times in spirit, for they are prayers for peace. So they have been placed at the beginning of the *Mundaka-Upaniṣad*. They make it clear that this human life has not been given to us to be lived only as a biological entity, a *paśu*, a creature, but as a *mānava*, a human, who has the capacity to control the movement of this *manas*, mind. Thus we are differentiated from the animal world. The purpose of our being born is indicated in the *śānti-pāṭha* as knowing our true original nature, and the origin of Nature, and the relation or equation of the two. Clearly this is the purpose of the first *śānti-pāṭha*. The second tells us of the struggle to emancipate ourselves from our bondages created through innumerable births, for which we need help from those who are stronger and wiser than we. Thus we pray to Indra, Pūṣan, Ariṣṭanemi and Bṛhaspati, the *devas* of the universe.

(to be continued)

Don't be afraid. Human birth is full of suffering and one has to endure everything patiently, taking the name of God. None, not even God in human form, can escape the sufferings of the body and mind. Even Avataras, saints and sages have to undergo the ordeal of suffering, for they take upon themselves the burden of the sins of omission and commission of ordinary human beings and thereby sacrifice themselves for the good of humanity.

—Sri Sarada Devi

A Review Article

THE NECTAR OF DISCOURSES ON ISHAVASYA-UPANISHAD:

by Swami Vidyaranya Giri; tr. & ed. Swami Narottam Giri;

Brahma Vidya Pitha, Shri Kailas Ashram, Rishikesh 249 201; pp. 388; Rs. 180/-.

Though a small Upaniṣad the *Īśāvāsyā* deals with many important concepts of great spiritual significance. The claims of the paths of karma and *jñāna*; the state of the unspiritual; the paradoxical nature of the Ātman; the state of self-realization; reconciliation of contradictions between the One and the many; the Absolute and the Personal; the doctrine of divine grace; and liberation through non-attachment and devotion—these are the topics that form its subject-matter. The main purpose of this Upanishad is to teach the essential unity of God and the world. It is interested not so much in the Absolute in itself as in the Absolute in relation to the world. Life in the Spirit and life in the world are not incompatible. Karma is not contrary to *jñāna*, rather it is a means to it, if performed without attachment. And renunciation is the renunciation of selfishness, not of life. The Upanishad teaches that neither knowledge of the supernatural nor knowledge of the natural alone is sufficient for true wisdom, and that the end, both of work and of renunciation, is the knowledge of the Atman within and the Brahman without, and the realization of their identity.

According to Śaṅkarācārya (whose commentary the author has mainly followed in his explanations), the Vedas lay down two independent paths for spiritual aspirants: the *pravṛtti-mārga* or the path of activity, and the *nivṛtti-mārga* or the path of withdrawal. To him there exists a fundamental antithesis between the two. The former is based on the belief in the variety of existence, whereas the latter emphasizes the unity underlying it. So they cannot be followed concurrently. However, Śaṅkara recognizes the value of action, which, when practised with non-attachment, brings about composure of mind and sets the aspirant on the path of contempla-

tion.

Śaṅkara analyses the *Īśāvāsyā-upanishad* as follows. Verse 1 teaches that those who understand the Atman and are fit for realizing it should give up all worldly desires and devote themselves exclusively to attaining liberation. Verse 2 enjoins the performance of works on such others as do not comprehend the Atman and are subsequently unable to realize it. (The actions that are implied here have no further range than possibly the small circumference of Vedic sacrifices.) Verses 3 to 8, having in view persons referred to in Verse 1, describe the real nature of the Atman and indicate the consequences of realizing and not realizing it. Verses 9 to 18 commend the simultaneous practice of *karma* and *upāsana* to persons referred to in Verse 2.

A large number of commentaries on this Upanishad already exist which treat its contents along the lines described above. The *Nectar of Discourses* also treats the Upanishad in the customary manner. So what is new? The work is an English translation of a compilation of fifty talks given in Hindi by Swami Vidyananda Giri about two decades ago. Nearly a half of the book is devoted to lengthy discussions on the mystic syllable *Om* and the peace invocation.

From Vedic times to the present day the word *Om* has been taken as a symbol and as an aid to meditation by spiritual aspirants. It is accepted as both one with Brahman and as a medium connecting man and God. In Patañjali's words, the worship of God and meditation on Him can be effected repeating *Om* and dwelling upon its meaning. If one knows the symbolism of *Om* and all the ideas it represents, to him all divine knowledge becomes easy of access. The book also deals with *Om* from the point of view of the *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad*, which has

given to Indian thought the famous theory of four states of consciousness. These states are explained in their relationship to *Om*. One finds in the book an exposition of the principle of *Om* as consisting of three elements *a*, *u*, and *m*, which refer to the three states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep. The Self is manifested in the universe in its gross, subtle and causal aspects. Answering to the four states of consciousness these are aspects of the Godhead, the last one (*tuṛīya*) being all-inclusive and ultimately real. Both psychologically and metaphysically, this doctrine has had a great influence on subsequent Indian thought.

The explanation of the peace invocation amounts to this: The universe must be regarded as Brahman, because the universe is infinite in its nature and so is Brahman. Subtracting the infinity of the universe from the infinity of Brahman, the residuum is also infinite. Thus piling infinity over infinity, the verse takes the mathematical lead and asserts that when the infinity of the universe is deducted from the infinity of Brahman the remainder has to be infinity. The inner meaning of this assertion is that the universe is nothing but Brahman.

In the course of the above discussions the author touches upon the salient features of various schools of Indian philosophy, especially their views of causation. The *ārambha-vāda* of the Nyāya, the *satkārya-vāda* of the Sāṅkhya, and the *vivarta-vāda* of the Advaita Vedānta come in for special treatment. The Cārvāka, Bauddha and Jaina theories are also considered. Only the Mīmāṃsā and the Vedānta are directly based on the Vedic texts. The Cārvāka, Bauddha and Jaina systems are heterodox and reject Vedic authority, while the remaining four, though not rejecting the Vedic authority, are based on independent grounds. This being a well known fact, the author's unfavourable assessment of the viewpoints of all the schools except the Vedānta mainly on the basis of whether or not they 'get support from the peace mantra' is curious. It has also made

the discourses rather over-elaborate. Nevertheless, one finds in these elucidations many useful ideas which one can otherwise learn only by studying the systems in the traditional way.

Although meant for religious people in general the spiritual aspirant will find in the book simple but valuable suggestions regarding the religious life. Swami Vidyananda Giri, himself a renowned scholar and sannyasin, evidently knows how to present religious teachings effectively. In almost all his lectures, he has made good use of humorous anecdotes and stories selected from the popular religious literature of India, and the discerning reader will find beneath them admonitions and exhortations which will be of great help to him. In doing so, the swami has not only helped those persons who wish to understand the spiritual contents of the Upanishad, but has also greatly succeeded in his object of exhibiting Upanishadic lore as an integral part of the social and religious life of India. The use of quotations from eminent spiritual giants at the end of almost each chapter enhances the value of the book. In one of his essays Aldous Huxley writes: 'The man who brings the constantly forgotten message of the Upanishads out of the past, and who can show others how to see all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, is performing an important service to society.'

A word about the translation. Translating—especially from an Indian language—is indeed a difficult job. There are unavoidable difficulties peculiar to an undertaking of this kind which do pose many editorial problems. But still an attempt has to be made throughout to meet the demands of exact scholarship as far as possible.

The book has a very attractive cover and a decent page layout. The publishers give a 50% discount if the book is bought before the 31st of December, 1996!

Swami Bhaswatananda
Belur Math

PRACTICAL VEDANTA

BEWARE EXPLOITERS!

Once Lord Ramachandra told Lakshmana, 'Please go outside and see. I feel that some unhappy person has come seeking justice.' Lakshmana went out and saw a dog standing there and brought it in. Lord Rama asked the dog the cause of its sorrow, to which it replied: 'O Lord you are our All-in-all and our protector. I have come to you seeking justice. The fact is that a selfish Brahmin hit me on the head without any cause.'

The Brahmin was summoned to the presence of Lord Rama and asked to justify his action. The Brahmin replied: 'O Rāghava! I was very hungry when I sat for my meal. Then I saw this dog sitting in front of me. Getting irritated, I asked it to move away. As it refused, I got angry and hit it. Certainly I have done wrong. You may give me whatever punishment you like.'

Sri Rama consulted his Ministers, who unanimously said, 'Brahmins should not be killed. Since you are a divine Incarnation, you can best decide a suitable punishment.'

The dog interrupted, 'Lord, it is my wish that you appoint this Brahmin the abbot of Kalinjer monastery.'

Everyone was amazed at this suggestion, for it meant that the Brahmin would not have to beg any more: he would obtain all comforts and happiness in that position for the rest of his life! When Lord Rama asked the dog to explain its strange wish, it replied: 'O Lord! In my last life I was the abbot of Kalinjer and thoroughly enjoyed all comforts and all sorts of delicious food. Although I spent some time in *sādhana*, I had to be born as a dog in this life because the wealth I over-enjoyed there was not mine but belonged to the monastery. That individual who misappropriates the wealth offered for the service of gods, women, children and beggars goes to hell. This Brahmin is ill-tempered and of a violent nature, and also foolish. So that is a fitting punishment for him!'

Reviews & Notices

TRIBUTES TO SWAMI VIVEKANANDA
AFTER A HUNDRED YEAR (1893-1993)
(Souvenir); publ. Ramakrishna Mission
Ashrama, Patna, Bihar 800 004, India;
pp. 117; Rs. 17/-.

This second part of the *Tributes* to Swami Vivekananda has just come out. Well appreciated by the public, Part One dealt with Swamiji's peregrinations through the States of India. This part deals with his work and utterances and wanderings in the United States of America and Europe. It is highly interesting and inspiring, containing as it does many anecdotes about Swamiji in the West that have not been much known until recently. Marie Louise Burke's *New Discoveries* have been an important source for most of the authors here.

About these authors in *Tributes*, Part Two, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Patna, expresses his gratitude to them for their work done 'wonderfully well'. We must agree with him and feel happy to recommend this second part of the Souvenir to the English knowing public. At its modest price of Rs. 17/- (Part One, Rs. 10/-), many people can afford to have a copy. Friends and advertisers for the Souvenir have contributed greatly but have not taken any pages for advertising. This generous spirit of theirs must be highly appreciated.

S.S., Mayavati

(Review of *Tributes to Swami Vivekananda, Part One*, appeared in the April issue of P.B., 1995.)

THE ESSENTIALS OF HINDUISM: By
Swami Bhaskarananda, Vedanta Society
of Western Washington, 2716 Broadway
East, Seattle, WA 98102, USA; 1994;
pp. 233; price not indicated.

The Indian origin community in North America, the bulk of it Hindu by religious

denomination, is now a million strong. At least an equal number of native North Americans are interested, in greater or lesser degree, in one or another aspect of Hindu religion, philosophy or culture. The growth of the two groups has, to a large extent, occurred independently of each other. The first derives from a complex of social and economic circumstances. The sources of the second are broadly cultural in nature. The present book is addressed to a perceived need in both groups for credible, comprehensive and uncomplicated information about the actuality of Hinduism.

The author has impressive credentials. A senior monk of the Ramakrishna monastic order, he is the President of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington in Seattle, and a past President of the Interfaith Council of Washington. He has lived and worked in North America for the past twenty years, frequently giving talks on Hinduism in churches, synagogues, schools, colleges and universities. In his preface he specifies the two reasons which led him to write this book. His audiences, mostly from either Christian or Jewish backgrounds, often asked him for material which could help them understand Hinduism without having to go through too many technical details. Hindu immigrants also requested him to write a book which would enable them to better explain their religious heritage to their children, now growing up in a new environment.

The result is a compact paperback which has been subtitled as 'a comprehensive overview of the world's oldest religion'. The contents include succinct chapters on the history of Hindu society and religion; its scriptures and ethics; its places and rituals of worship; its philosophical background and conception of divinity; and its distinctive doctrines of *karma*, *samsāra*, and *yoga*. Some popular notions about Hinduism, concerning the caste system, vegetarianism and cows and so on, are duly explained. Lesser

known aspects, like its belief in the harmony of all religions, are given due emphasis. An informative appendix describes the major religious festivals and gives a helpful bibliography for further reading. The presentation is simple, straightforward and devoid of sanctimony.

To attempt to encapsulate the essentials of a religion, which is also a world view and a way of life distinguished throughout its long history by an all-encompassing tendency resulting in luxuriant variety, is not easy task. The usual word for religion, *dharma*, itself has a range of meanings and nuances, as the author has explained. Condensation, moreover, also involves selection and exclusion. It would therefore be rash to presume that such a book could constitute an unchallengeable authoritative exposition. Some mundane points pertinent to readers in North America have also not been dealt with: for example, how can a non-Hindu who wishes to convert to Hinduism, say on marriage, get about doing so; or the meaning of *mithuna* sculptures on certain temples, now well known as tourist attractions. Yet most questions which may be raised in general about Hinduism have been anticipated and answered with cogency and candour, and few would disagree that this

book admirably serves the purpose for which it was written.

It is also of considerable relevance for the needs of yet another audience. This is the new generation maturing in India in an increasingly English-speaking environment which is changing rapidly with the influx of new cultural patterns in tandem with economic transformation and the growth of communication technology. Like its counterparts in expatriate Indian communities abroad, it also is getting distanced from its cultural roots and heritage of which, in most cases, it seeks a closer knowledge, even as it may be repelled by what it perceives as elements of superstition, exclusivism and obscurantism obtaining in the faith of its forefathers.

The wish for a better understanding of Hinduism is no less in this west-oriented group within India than in the North American communities whose requirements first prompted Swami Bhaskarananda's valuable contribution. For this reason it is to be hoped that his book will also be made available in India, as indeed in other parts of the world with populations of Indian origin and others interested in the legacy of India.

A.N.D. Haksar, Noida, U.P.

Religious Mysticism: Some Observations on the Poetry of Shamas Faqir

(Continued from page 290)

her goal—which is nothing short of Union with the Beloved.

In conclusion, I should like to reiterate that as a Muslim poet writing in Kashmiri, Shamas Faqir is outstanding in his grasp and assimilation of many mystical concepts and images that occur in the sacred Hindu texts. He owes this assimilation not only to his contact with the co-existing Hindu culture of his time but also to his own receptiveness and openness of mind. After Sheikh Nur-

ud-Din Rishi of Chrari Sheriff, it is he (before others followed them) who paid glowing tributes to Lal Ded in a poem wholly devoted to her, titled '*Zār Mila Nāv Bhagvānas Sīt*'. The poem shows how high he held her in his esteem, how familiar he was with her story and how thoroughly acquainted he must have been with her *vākhs*. His poems deserve to be read with care, as a source of delight and spiritual instruction. □